



KOKORO CONNECTION

K A K O - R A N D O M

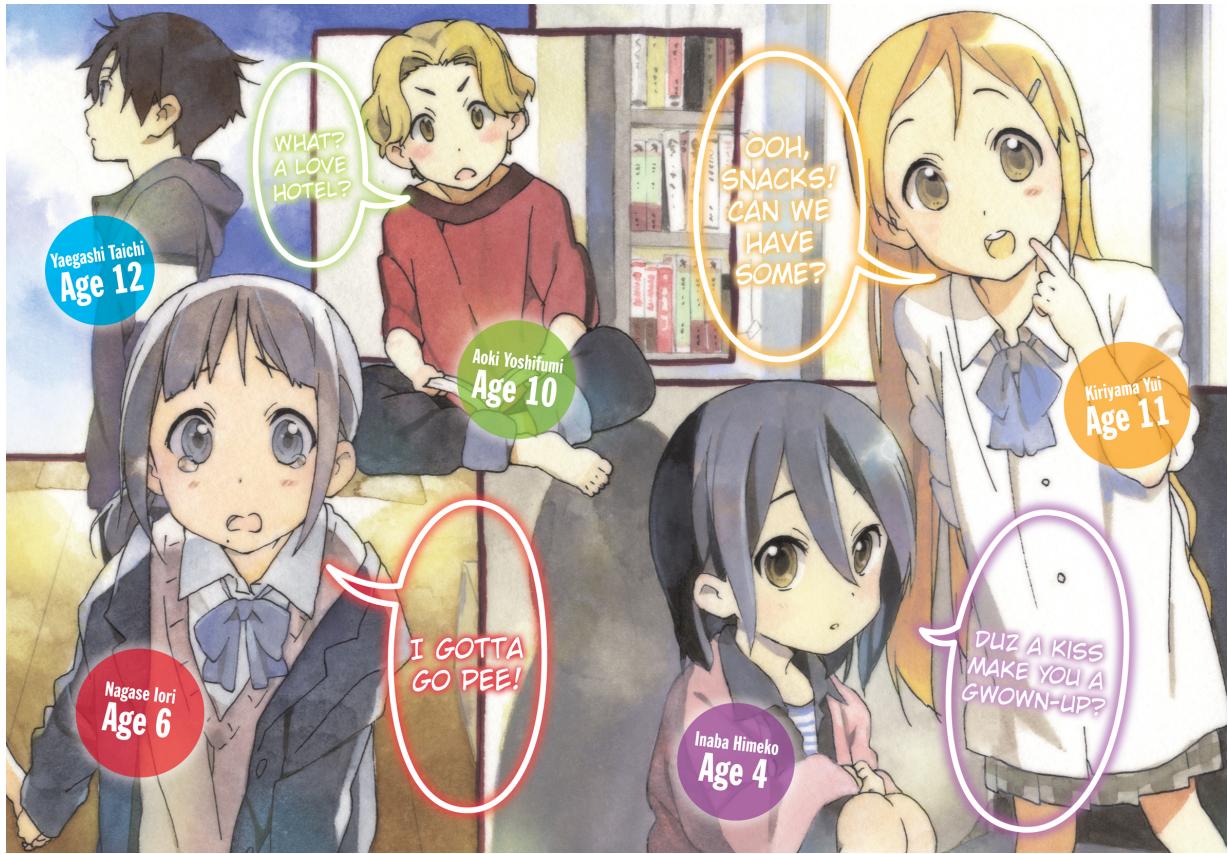
Sadanatsu Anda

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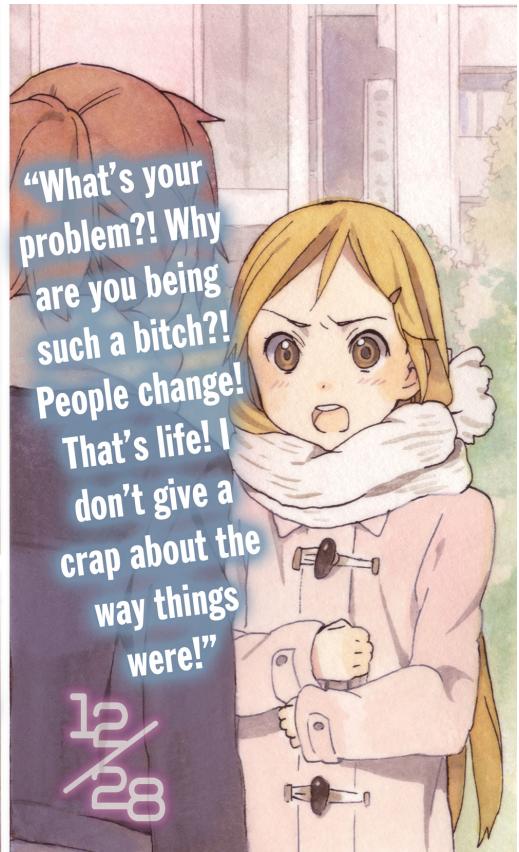


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Prologue: New Year's Day

The first day of the new year found Yaegashi Taichi visiting a local Shinto shrine.

Normally the place was quiet and peaceful, but today it was bustling with visitors and food stands. As the tantalizing smells of savory sauces and sugary sweets drifted overhead, Taichi and his coat-clad companion, Inaba Himeko, made their way through the crowd—gripped by panic.

“Aaargh! Goddamnit! Where the hell is he?!” Inaba’s breath left her lips in a white, wispy fog as she smoothed her straight, shoulder-length dark hair into place.

“No luck on your end, huh? Man, where did he go...?”

“Wheredy *go*? ”

“Go, go!”

Two small girls clung to each of Taichi’s hands—one the spitting image of a grade-school-aged Kiriyama Yui, and the other a toddler-sized version of Nagase Iori.

The five of them had come as a group for *hatsumoude*, the first shrine visit of the new year, but now one of them had gone missing.

“I’m starting to think we should’ve gone somewhere with fewer crowds...” Taichi muttered.

“Shoulda, woulda, coulda. No use crying over spilled milk,” Inaba snapped back.

“No use!”

“Yoose!”

“We’d better find him fast. Kids get into enough trouble just in general, but when you add everything else on top of it...”

Not good.

“I get it already! Quit your bitching! Tch... Maybe I

should've given him my cell phone... Then again, who knows what he'd do with it..."

"Maybe we shouldn't have bothered in the first place..."

"God, will you quit whining? You're the one who kept going on and on about how we all agreed to celebrate New Year's together as a club!"

"Club!"

"Lub!"

"And will you two *shut up*!?"

Unfortunately, the two miniature lookalikes ignored her mostly-uncalled-for scolding.

"Shuddup!"

"Dup, dup!"

"Why do I even bother... Forget it. I'm gonna go look for Ao—I mean, Yoshifumi."

Before she could take off, however, a boy walked up to her—a youth who looked remarkably like a grade-school version of Aoki Yoshifumi.

"Hey, Miss Inaba! Will you gimme some money so I can buy a candy apple?"

Evidently he wasn't even aware that they'd been looking for him. Unsurprisingly, Inaba lashed out with a karate chop.
"HYAH!"

"OUCH! Wh... What was that fooor...? It's just one little apple... Can't you buy it for me...?" Tears welled in the boy's eyes.

"After that scare you just put us through? You've got a lot of nerve, kiddo!"

"Inaba, c'mon, don't frighten him. He didn't even get into any trouble." Taichi turned to the miniature Aoki lookalike. "That said, mister, we don't want you going off on your own, you hear me?"

"Okaaay..." the boy answered. He didn't seem to have been misbehaving on purpose; maybe this time he'd listen.

"Glad to hear it. Now go on, Inaba. Buy him the candy apple."

"Excuse me? I just bought him some cotton candy earlier!" Inaba paused. "On second thought, I can just make Aoki pay me back later... Here you go, you little brat!"

"Yay!" The boy accepted the money and gleefully ran off to get in line at the candy apple stand.

"Come straight back, alright?" Taichi called after him. Still, it'd likely be difficult to lose track of him again now that he was within eyeshot.

That's that problem solved, I guess.

"You guys want any?"

"We still got this!"

"Dis!"

The girls held up their neglected cotton candy and dug in with gusto, as though they'd only just remembered.

"Don't be shy, now. I'll buy you anything you want."

"You're a sucker for little girls, aren't you?"

"Not 'little girls' specifically! Just kids in general! Don't make this weird!"

Is it such a crime to be nice to little kids who happen to be girls?!

"I sure wish you'd share that generosity with us big girls, too..."

"...You want me to buy you something?"

"You're damn right I do."

"Why should—?" He stopped himself. Inaba was always a good friend to him, and he often felt indebted to her for her kindness. Why *shouldn't* he treat her to something nice for a change? "...Would you get my wallet out of my back pocket for me? My hands are a little full at the moment, so just take what you need."

"Sure thing." Inaba reached into his pocket, fished out his wallet, and took out a 100-yen coin. "This should cover it."

"Really? You sure that's enough?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Be right back." With that, she jogged over to the nearby *takoyaki* stand.

Meanwhile, Taichi glanced over at the miniature Aoki

clone to find that he was still waiting in line. By the looks of things, it would be a while yet before he got his candy apple.

A short while later, Inaba returned carrying a tray of six *takoyaki* balls. She stabbed a toothpick into one of them and held it up in front of his face.

“C’mom, open your mouth.”

“H-Hold on a minute... Why me?”

“I wanted some *takoyaki*, but I can’t eat all six by myself, so I made you foot one-third of the bill, and now I’m gonna have you eat two of them, which is equal to the amount you paid for, okay?” she blurted out in a single breath, as though she’d rehearsed it all in advance.

“Okay, but... I don’t need you to feed it to me...”

“I thought you said your hands were full?”

“I mean, they are, but I can just let go—”

“And risk losing one of the kids? That would defeat the whole purpose of why you wanted to hold hands with them in the first place. Besides, I don’t think they want to let go... do you, girls?”

“No!” the two shouted back in unison.

“See?”

Clearly she’d already thought this through. He was no match for her.

“Okay, fine. But let it cool off a bit more before you—”

She blew on the *takoyaki* once, then a second time.

“There. It’s cool now.”

Apparently this was to be the next trial(?) he would face today. Reluctantly, he opened his mouth.

“Wider! Say ‘ahh’!”

“Ahhh...”

Inaba leaned in, bringing the *takoyaki* closer. Embarrassed, he averted his eyes. Then he realized that would only make this weirder, so he looked back.

A pair of long-lashed, almond-shaped eyes looked back at him, ensnaring him.

Just as he felt the *takoyaki* hit his tongue, however, he

heard the electronic click of a camera going off. Startled, he whipped around in the direction of the noise to find a kimono-clad girl standing there, pointing her cell phone at them.

There stood Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C, self-professed “apostle of love,” popularly referred to as “The Love Guru,” all dressed up in her very best. As usual, her hair was tied back, but today it was adorned with an ornamental hairpin. Her glasses glinted in the wintry sunlight.



"Why, if it isn't Inaba-san and Yaegashi-kun! Fancy meeting you here. Happy New Year's." Out of the frying pan and into the fire. She always seemed to turn up at the worst possible moments, almost as though she'd planned it all from the start. "Anyway, what a hilarious predicament I appear to have walked in on. So hilarious, I couldn't help but snap a pic."

"Mmnomnom... Knock it off, would you? Delete it!" Taichi demanded (or rather, he tried, but the mouthful of food dampened its impact considerably). The last thing he wanted was photographic evidence lying around.

"I don't think I will. After all, it's not every day you encounter a scene out of a harem anime in real life."

"I don't have a harem!"

"A cute girl on each arm, plus Inaba-san hand-feeding you? If this isn't a harem, I don't know what is."

"...I'm sorry..." Why exactly he felt the need to apologize, even he wasn't sure.

"Do tell: is Nagase-san alright with this little arrangement?"

"Who, me?" The little Nagase lookalike perked up. Immediately, Taichi let go of her hand and instead clamped it over her mouth. "Mmffgg?!"

"I need you to stay quiet until I say otherwise. Can you do that for me, please?"

She looked confused for a moment, then nodded. *Good girl.*

"What was that about?"

"N-Nothing! It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

This did little to dispel the look of suspicion on Fujishima's face. "I'm not sure I buy that... Oh well. Setting that aside... Why is it I find the two of you here canoodling in broad daylight? Where's Nagase-san?"

"W-We're not canoodling! And Nagase isn't my girlfriend."

Neither of them were, to be accurate. Taichi hadn't made things official with anyone as of yet.

“Ah, I see. So your plan is to maintain this vague, formless status quo and thus avoid having to commit to anyone in particular... I’d be very careful if I were you, Yaegashi-kun. In the end, men like you will always get what’s coming to them.”

“I... I’m telling you, I didn’t plan this!”

“Oh, so it ‘just happened,’ did it? You truly are the worst sort of person. As an apostle of love, perhaps it’s my duty to dole out some justice... in the form of my fists.”

“What kind of ‘apostle of love’ goes around punching people?! *And why aren’t you helping me deny it, Inaba?!*”

“Hmm? Oh, I was thinking I’d let Fujishima get the wrong idea about us. Maybe she’d spread some rumors, y’know? Win-win.”

You’re a monster, Inaba Himeko!

“Don’t you think maybe this isn’t the best time for—”

“Relax! I was *kidding*, alright? Chill.”

Was she? Lately it was getting hard to tell. Sometimes it seemed like it was all part of a calculated plan, and yet other times she came across like she was just messing with him for fun...

“Still, we probably don’t want any photos of this,” she muttered as an afterthought. With that, she headed over to Fujishima and started whispering in her ear. Her eyes glinted sharply behind her glasses. The next moment, she started tapping away on her cell phone, then held the screen up for the other girl to see.

After Inaba gave it a once-over, the two girls exchanged a firm handshake, and she walked back over to Taichi like nothing had happened.

“What was *that* about? Did you guys strike some kind of bargain, or what?”

Fujishima didn’t strike him as the type to easily concede.

“Don’t worry about it, Taichi. It’s between me and her.”

“She’s right, Yaegashi-kun. You see, the bonds between girls are like a secret garden where no boys may enter...”

Fujishima chuckled and wiped the drool oozing from the corner of her mouth... but Taichi pretended not to see it. He got the sense he wasn't going to like where this was headed.

"Fair enough. As long as you deleted the photo, I can't complain. A-Anyway, see you sometime next semes—"

"I'm not finished." Fujishima adjusted her glasses. "Pray tell, who are these sweet little girls you're holding hands with?"

Damn it, I knew she'd ask about that...

"Oh, uh... These are my, y'know, second cousins twice removed..."

"So they're related to you?"

"Y-Yeah?"

Instantly, Inaba rounded on him. "Dumbass! You should've said they're related to *them*!"

Crap. She was right.

"I see. That's fascinating, seeing as that one looks nearly identical to Nagase-san, and that one is a dead ringer for Kiriyma-san."

"Whaddya mean? I am Kiriya—mmph?!"

Inaba clapped a hand over the Kiriyma lookalike's mouth, then pulled her into a firm embrace, burying the girl's face into her stomach. Muffled sounds of complaint could be heard as she flailed in protest.

Naturally, Fujishima found this rather suspect.

"What did you do that for? You know, come to think of it, the more I look at them, the more uncanny the resemblance... Almost like perfect recreations of what the two of them must have looked like as childr—"'

"Hey, Miss Inaba! I'm back!"

That was when the Aoki lookalike returned, candy apple in hand.

"What do we have here? A younger relative of Inaba-san's? Wait... He looks exactly like Aoki-kun... To an almost startling degree, might I add—"

"Oh, crap! We're, uh, gonna be late for the thing! We

gotta run, Taichi!” Inaba shouted, then grabbed the mini-Kiriyama’s hand and took off, pausing briefly to elbow the mini-Aoki while making sure not to drop the tray of *takoyaki* balls. “Run, idiot! I’ll buy you whatever you want, so just run!”

“Wha? For real?! Heck yes! Full speed ahead!”

“Don’t just run off wherever you want! Follow me! HEY! Argh, you little dipshit! You trying to get yourself lost again?!”

“W-Wait for me!” Taichi called, but Inaba and the others were already jetting off at lightning speed. Thinking quickly, he crouched down and hoisted the miniature Nagase lookalike into his arms. “This might be a little scary, but I need you to be a big, brave girl, okay?”

A second later, he took off running after Inaba.

Thankfully, the mini-Nagase seemed to enjoy it. “Wheeeee! Am flyiiing!” she shrieked gleefully, flailing her limbs.

“Yes, you’re flying, okay? Now settle down! Don’t swing your cotton candy like th—GWAH!” The sugary pink cloud blindsided him, and the next thing he knew, he’d crashed headfirst into a passerby. “Whoa!”

“Ow!”

“Ack! I... I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t worry, I’m okay... Wait, what the? Taichi?”

Instantly, his apologetic smile vanished.

“Care to explain yourself, dearest brother?!”

There stood Rina, his younger sister by five years, glaring dully back at him. She had been in a *really* bad mood as of late... for a few different reasons.

“Wh... What are you doing here...?” he stammered. His luck today was proving to be the worst.

“I’m here with some friends. Now then...” She smiled coldly. “Who’s that little girl you’re carrying? She’s not a relative of ours, is she? And she’s a little too young to be a friend of yours... I’m starting to think I might need to call the

cops."

"Huh?" The mini-Nagase tilted her head, and Rina's glare deepened. *Yikes.*

"I'm sorry! I'll explain everything later, so please just let me off the hook for right now!" With that, he took off like a bat out of hell.

He could hear Rina calling after him—"Hey! Wait!"—but he ignored her. He would have to pay the price for his insolence once he arrived back at home, and it was a terrifying prospect... Nevertheless, he somehow managed to catch up with the others, and together the five of them escaped from the crowd of shrine-goers. Thankfully, neither Fujishima nor Rina appeared to be chasing after them.

Inaba gasped for breath. "Should've known... there was a chance we'd... run into people we knew... Think we got a bit too cocky..."

"Yeah... Agreed... No more risky moves for today... Hmm? New email?" Upon spotting the notification, Taichi flipped open his phone to find two unread messages waiting for him: one from Fujishima, and one from Rina.

Once the new semester starts, I want to hear ALL the details. And you're not getting out of it until I'm satisfied. Pow, pow! ❤

I don't like the look of that heart emoji, Fujishima-san!

I DeMaND aN eXPLaNaTiOn. DePeNDinG oN YouR aNSWeR, THeRe MaY Be PuNiSHMeNT.

And I don't know why you wrote it like that, but it's giving me the creeps, Rina!!!

Taichi slumped his shoulders in defeat. "How did things end up like this...?"

"End up!"

"Dup!"

"At least little Yui and Iori are in a good mood, I guess..."

Taichi sighed, gazing down at the two girls in question.

Something like this should have been impossible—at least, until somebody invented time machines—and yet here he was, face to face with kid versions of his friends from school. Yes, the impossible was somehow now very possible indeed.

It all began last Christmas, on the final day of the semester...

Chapter 1: It Began With A Warning

First there was the body-swap, and then came the Liberation. Now, at last, this ludicrous year was coming to a close.

Enrolling in high school should've been a major milestone in their lives, and yet Taichi found he could scarcely remember anything from the first half of the year. Too much had happened ever since their first encounter with «Heartseed» nearly four solid months ago.

Looking back, the pre-«Heartseed» era of his life was utterly ordinary... but then all of a sudden everything took a turn for the supernatural. Was there any way he could have avoided it?

If he'd enrolled in a different school—joined a different club—never met the other members of the CRC—could he have enjoyed a more idyllic high school career? Sure. Maybe his grades would've been better, too.

But Taichi didn't regret enrolling in Yamaboshi High School, or joining the newly created Cultural Research Club, or making friends with his fellow members. If he were asked to do it all over again, he was certain he'd make all the same choices.

In taking this path, maybe he lost some things along the way... but to Taichi, what he gained in return was far more precious.



The closing ceremony was held in the auditorium. Once it

concluded, the students returned to their assigned classrooms for the final homeroom period of the year, led by their class advisor.

The advisor for Taichi's class, 1-C, was Gotou Ryuuzen (AKA "Gossan"), the school physics teacher popularly known for his casual, laid-back attitude.

"So, setting aside everything the principal and school counselor said on stage, you're all basically free to do whatever you like over winter break—as long as you don't cause trouble or commit any crimes. I don't wanna have to get called in, you understand me?"

For a teacher, he was... *refreshingly honest*. Sure, let's go with that.

"Now then, I've passed out all the worksheets... Am I forgetting anything, Fujishima?"

"I don't know what you expect me to say. As far as I can tell, you've covered all the bases, Sensei," class president Fujishima Maiko responded. As she was a highly competent and responsible individual, Gotou had been foisting a lot of his workload on her as of late (as well as the CRC's own Inaba Himeko).

"Oh yeah. Come to think of it, it's Christmas, isn't it? Okay, well, none of you better sneak off to any love hotels, you get me?! Love hotels are for adults only! If you're gonna do it, do it at home, and always use protection!"

"You should refrain from making any comments that could be construed as inappropriate, Sensei. These days they're really cracking down on that sort of thing."

As was readily apparent, Fujishima was practically Gotou's supervisor at this point.

"Alrighty then, let's wrap this up! It's still a little early to let you go, but I'm sure they'll let it slide for today. Class dismissed!"

Instantly, the class roared to life with excited chatter. The last day of each semester always tended to evoke a certain giddy vibe among the student body.

"Yo, Yaegashi!" Taichi's friend Watase Shingo called out to him. "Remember: no unprotected sex this holiday season! Not that you're at risk of getting laid anytime soon!"

"Nope. And neither are you."

With good looks, athletic skills, and a fun personality, Watase was a triple threat—and yet he was still single. Why? Because he only had eyes for stone-cold Fujishima Maiko, and despite his best efforts, she hadn't given him a second glance.

"Aw, shut up! Anyways, remember how I was saying we should hang out over winter break? Well, I was thinking—"

"Taichi! We'll see you at the clubroom!" Inaba called across the classroom.

"Don't be Iaaate!" Nagase added.

"O-Okay!"

With that, his two fellow clubmates left the room.

"Clubroom? What's the story there?"

"Oh, well, we decided we'd throw a little CRC Christmas party today..."

"Sheesh! You guys are super tight with each other, huh? I guess that might make it a little tricky to date one of 'em..."

"I dunno... Seems to me we don't have to worry about that..."

"Then why haven't you hooked up with Nagase already?"

"Well... Things've gotten a little complicated lately..."

"You're always so vague about this stuff, you know that?"

Trust me, I know I ought to set the record straight, but... well...

"Eh, whatever. Looks like you gotta get going, so we can work out all the details later. I'll shoot you an email."

"Sounds good."

Watase walked off, and Taichi got to his feet.

On his way out, he paused to chat with some of his other classmates—*Any Christmas plans? New Year's Eve traditions? What day of the week is January 4th, anyway? Fuck the homework, this school can suck my dick!*

(The latter sentiment was one Taichi himself didn't share.)

Before he knew it, the time flew by. At this rate, the other club members would get mad at him for sure. He hurried to the door.

There, a group of girls waved to him from across the room.
“See you next year, Yaegashi-kun!”

Over the past few months, the CRC had been tormented with one supernatural phenomenon after the next, often making a scene in front of their whole class, and yet their classmates still welcomed them with open arms. Taichi sincerely appreciated it.

Their entire ordeal had given him a newfound sense of appreciation for the mundane.

Just then, as he turned down the hall, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

A casual little tap, no different from any of the countless interactions happening on a daily basis at Yamaboshi High School.

But in that instant, goosebumps shot up his arms.

Something wasn't right.

The air itself felt... unearthly somehow. He sensed it—smelled it—right there in the school hallway. And it was a smell he was all too familiar with.

No, it can't be. Taichi shook his head. Today was just another ordinary day.

At least, it was supposed to be.

Admittedly, the CRC clubroom had been corrupted by this otherworldly abnormality in the past—but the rest of the school was safe. That was «Heartseed»'s policy. Sure, it was capable of turning up at any given time, but once it set a rule, it always committed to it, right?

The chatter in the background felt so... distant.

He didn't want to turn and look—but he knew he had to confront it. There would be no escape.

Swallowing hard, Taichi turned to find... someone who wasn't Gotou Ryuuzen.

He blinked. There stood a tomboyish girl with short hair—Oosawa Misaki from the track team.

I guess «Heartseed» didn't turn up after all... Was it just all in my head?

Wait.

Her eyes were half-lidded.

She exuded the same lethargic lack of energy as «Heartseed»... and yet her presence felt different somehow

“...Oosawa...?” he asked timidly.

“...You will be their knight,” she replied slowly—her tone in stark contrast to her usual self. After all, the Oosawa he knew was always babbling excitedly about something.

“Wh... What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Tell no one of my presence... Can you promise that?”

Now he was sure of it. *This was not Oosawa.*

And... it wasn’t «Heartseed», either.

“...If you break this promise... I will change ‘noon to five’ to ‘all hours.’ Understand?”

“Hold on. What are you even talking about?”

“Soon it will start... and then you will know... Farewell.”

With that, Oosawa’s body promptly collapsed to the floor.

“Wh—?!” Taichi quickly grabbed her by the arm to stop her fall. “You okay?!”

“Nnngh... Huh...? Wh-What’s going on?!” Oosawa jumped to her feet in wide-eyed surprise. “Uhh... What was I doing...? Yaegashi-kun?”

“I’m not sure... Looked like you collapsed all of a sudden...”

“For real? Maybe I’m anemic or something... But what am I doing in the hallway?” Evidently she had no memory of what had taken place. “W-Well, anyway, thanks for looking out for me.”

“No problem.”

And so she went back inside the classroom, a puzzled look on her face.

“Man, what was that...?”

You'll be their knight. Tell no one. Noon to five. All hours.

None of it made any sense. And if it wasn't «Heartseed», then... what on earth was possessing Oosawa's body just now?

Baffled, Taichi headed up the four flights of stairs to Rec Hall Room 401, home to the Cultural Research Club.

When he arrived, he found everyone else waiting for him. The tables were lined with drinks, snacks, and even some board games—all the stuff they'd brought in yesterday in preparation for the party.

“Hey, Taichi, did you write that?” Inaba asked, her almond-shaped eyes sharply narrowed. Paired with her slender, stately figure, it was a good look for her, strangely enough. She jerked her thumb over her shoulder at the chalkboard, and Taichi's gaze followed suit.

There, someone had written four of their names:

INABA HIMEKO NAGASE IORI KIRIYAMA YUI AOKI
YOSHIFUMI

“What the heck? How come I'm not on here? Or was I supposed to write it myself?”

At this question, Inaba's scowl deepened. “Seriously? So it wasn't you, either?”

“We found it when we got to the clubroom,” Kiriyama explained, her arms wrapped tightly around her petite frame. “But none of us remember writing it...”

“Then who did?”

“If we knew that, we wouldn't have asked you, dipshit!”

“It's a mystery!” exclaimed Aoki Yoshifumi, his wavy locks bouncing.

At this, Nagase put her hand to her chin in an exaggerated display of contemplation. “Perhaps the culprit intentionally set this up as a puzzle for us to solve...”

“Oh, I get it! It’s like a murder, and this is the victim’s dining message! In that case, the killer can only be... Taichi! Because his name isn’t on there!”

“I didn’t kill anybody! Your solution is way too simple! And furthermore, it’s not ‘dining message,’ you idiot, it’s ‘dying message’!”

Aoki’s stupidity had managed to earn three different snarky retorts at the same time. He was clearly on top of his game today.

“If this is like a prank somebody’s pulling on us... then my guess is Iori. I mean, they say the guilty party is usually the first person to point something out.”

“Y-Yui! You don’t trust me...?”

“No, no, of course I do! It was just, like, a theory! Obviously our sweet Iori would never lie to us!”

“Oh, Yui... You *do* understand me!”

“I’d never doubt you, Iori!”

The two girls embraced each other tightly like they were actresses in a stage play. Inaba stared at them for a moment, then grimaced. “Did an outsider come in here...? And if so, what for?”

“It’s probably just a prank, right? I mean, all they did was write four of our names... That said, I still think it’s weird that they left me off...”

“They wrote more than just our names, Taichi.”

“Huh?”

Taichi glanced back at the chalkboard. That was when he saw it:

12:00 PM - 5:00 PM

“Noon to five? ...Wait...”

Come to think of it, that was the same time frame “Oosawa” specified. Her voice flickered through his mind once more.

—*I will change “noon to five” to “all hours.”*

A chill ran down his spine. Was this just pure coincidence, or...?

The clock on the wall indicated 11:50 AM.

He debated whether to detail his earlier experience in the hallway, but she—it?—had warned him not to tell anyone, lest he “break this promise.” Maybe his best bet, then, was to keep quiet and see where things went from here.

They were still okay. There was nothing around to derail their lives anymore.

At least, for the moment.

“This is a little too nonsensical to be a prank, if you ask me. Is anything missing?”

At Inaba’s question, the five of them looked around the room... but everything seemed to be in order.

“Hmmm... Whatever. It’s kinda creepy, but we can worry about it later. For now, let’s start the party.”

They clinked their cans of soda together in a toast, and the Christmas party began in earnest. *Time to eat, drink, and be merry!*

“Whew! Soda is so dang good!”

“God, Iori! Sip it, don’t chug it!” Kiriyama rolled her eyes and took a swig of her drink. “Gah, what the heck?! This stuff is like BURNING! How does anyone drink this?! ”

“Sit your ass back down, Yui! I swear, am I the only girl around here who has any goddamn decorum? What a joke.”

“I don’t think slouching over the table like a middle-aged man at his second bar of the night counts as ‘table manners,’ Inabacchan—OUCH!”

“Slouching? Fuck you! My posture is perfect!”

As usual, the Cultural Research Club was always squabbling over something. Glancing nervously at the clock, Taichi took a sip of his drink.

“Relax, Taichi! The party’s just started! Or do you have a hot date after this?” Nagase joked, peering at him curiously. His heart thumped in his chest. She was generally considered the prettiest girl in their grade, and it was easy

to see why.

“What? No!” He glanced at the clock again. Noon was just seconds away.

Not that anything would happen, of course—

But then anything did happen.

“Nngh...!” Out of nowhere, Nagase groaned and slammed her drink down onto the table.

“N-Nagase...?”

“M-My body... feels all hot...” The color drained from her face as she began to shiver violently.

“Whoa... Are you okay?!”

Her mouth moved, but the words didn’t come.

“Wait... Whoa... I’m feeling really warm, too...” Kiriyma croaked beside her, wincing and clutching at her reddish-brown hair with both hands.

“What’s going on here?!” Inaba demanded.

“What’s wrong, ladies?!” Aoki piped up in alarm.

Noon to five... the mysterious non-«Heartseed» entity... the message scrawled on the chalkboard... and now this.

Apparently noon signaled the start of something—but what?

And then Nagase and Kiriyma blinked out of existence.

“WHAT?!” Taichi screeched in an almost inhuman voice. He couldn’t begin to process it. He rubbed his eyes and looked again—at which point he realized that their chairs weren’t actually empty.

In their place sat two cute little girls, each practically drowning in extremely oversized Yamaboshi High School uniforms.

“Huh... wha... who...?” Inaba stammered.

“Wh... What happened to Nagase and Kiriyma?” Taichi asked.

The two small girls—one with dark hair, the other reddish-brown—peered curiously around the room.

“Nnn... My clothes awe too big!” the dark-haired girl exclaimed, waving her oversized sleeves.

"Mine too," nodded the other girl, the one with long chestnut-colored hair. She paused to roll up her sleeves, then turned to the smaller girl beside her and helped her roll up hers. "Ooh, snacks! Can we have some?"

The three of them nodded wordlessly in response.

"Yay!" She took two small packages of snack cookies and offered one to the other girl. "Want one? Here."

"Thank you vewwy much!"

With that, the two girls happily began to devour their prize. Meanwhile, Taichi and Aoki exchanged glances... then grabbed each other by the shoulders.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What the heck is HAPPENING?! What's going on?! Am I hallucinating or did they trade places with two random kids?!" Aoki screamed, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"How should I know?! Maybe I'm hallucinating!"

"Hallucinating... Aha! That must be it! Okay, let's close our eyes and count to three, and when we open them again, everything will be back to normal! Ready? One... two... three... IT DIDN'T WORK!"

"Whose kids are these?! Where are their parents?! Somebody come get your daughters!" Taichi yelled, now in a full-fledged panic.

As for Inaba, she chuckled dryly, got to her feet, and walked to the window. There, she opened it and screamed at the top of her lungs—

"WHAT THE FUUUUUUUUUUCK?!?!"

Her scream echoed all across campus.

Once they had finished venting out all their panic, the three of them began to analyze the situation. Together, they arrived at the following hypothetical (and utterly impossible) conclusion: Nagase Lori and Kiriyama Yui had gone back in time and physically reverted to their childhood selves.

The two younger children now present with them in the clubroom looked undeniably similar to their missing clubmates. ("Nagase" looked to be about six years old, and

“Kiriyama” was likely around eleven or twelve.) They had also appeared in the exact same spot as their older selves in what amounted to a split-second—not nearly enough time for them to trade places and hide somewhere.

Plus, it wasn’t just that the two of them had shrunk in size, either; their features were noticeably more round and youthful. Ultimately, their hairstyles were the only thing left unchanged—unless you counted the Yamaboshi High School uniforms they were wearing, which were identical to their original owners’, right down to the contents of their pockets.

When they asked the miniature Nagase to stand up during the clothing search, her skirt and panties threatened to fall straight to the floor, causing a slight panic. (Inaba promptly poked both Aoki’s and Taichi’s eyes out, then made the necessary clothing adjustments while they were busy flailing in agony.)

But the final nail in the coffin was the testimony from the children themselves.

The two girls sat across the table from Aoki, Inaba, and Taichi, dressed in their oversized, rolled-up uniforms. The once fairly short skirts were now practically blankets on their legs.

Inaba cleared her throat. “Alright, let me ask you one more time, just to be sure... What’s your name, and how old are you? Starting from this older girl here.”

“I’m Kiriyama Yui, and I’m eleven years old!” Kiriyama [age 11] replied enthusiastically. She seemed a bit more headstrong than the Kiriyama they were used to—the sort of go-getter who would run around town in wintertime without a coat on.

“...And? What about you there?”

“My name is Nagase Iori, and I’m six!” Nagase [age 6] answered with an equal amount of verve. Her scrunchie had come loose at some point during the... transition?... but now that she was wearing it again, she really did look like a picture-perfect mini-Nagase.



“Alright, next question. Who’s this gangly-looking horndog over here on the left?”

“That’s Aoki-san!”

“Mister Aoki!”

“*Horndog*?! Really, Inabacchan?!”

“And who’s the handsome fellow over here on the right?”

“That’s Taichi-san!”

“Mister Taichi!”

“Oh... I was expecting some sort of insult, but okay...” He wasn’t used to her being so... nice to him. How was he supposed to respond?

“Lastly, who am I?”

“You’re Inaba-san!”

“Miss Inaba!”

“Cool. So, how do the five of us all know each other?”

“Huh? I’m not sure... We just *do*...?”

“We just *do*!”

“...Alright. Next question: do you remember what happened yesterday?”

“...Well... I’m pretty sure I went to school, then after school I went to the karate dojo... but my memory’s kinda fuzzy...”

“I goed to school and I pwayed with my fwiends!”

“Okay. This next one’s just for Yui, since it’s a little complicated.” Inaba pushed a pen and a blank piece of paper across the table at Kiriyama [age 11]. “Can you outline your weekly class schedule from memory?”

“For the second semester? Yeah, I think so...” Using the provided implements, Kiriyama [age 11] began to draw up a schedule, pausing occasionally to murmur to herself. “There, all done. I’m pretty sure I got it all right...”

Inaba pulled out her cell phone and compared it to a photo taken by someone who was in Kiriyama’s fifth grade class, passed along to her via a mutual acquaintance. (Frankly, they were lucky they managed to find someone who had still kept theirs after all this time.)

“...Yep, it’s almost completely spot-on. Alright, you girls are free to hang out and do whatever.”

“Okay! Wanna play a game, Iori-chan?”

“Yeah, wet’s pway! I wanna pway dis one!”

“Othello? Isn’t that a little too hard for you?”

“No! I can do it!”

The two of them got along so well, they may as well have been sisters. It was a heartwarming moment... and yet Inaba watched them with a dismal expression.

“Let’s review what we’ve learned.”

Nagase and Kiriyma had reverted—physically and mentally—to a younger point in their childhoods.

Regardless, they readily accepted their surroundings without question (and yet, when asked to explain why they were here, neither of them could find an answer). They appeared to partially retain their memories from those particular eras of their childhoods, although not to the point that they could remember what they did yesterday—but perhaps this was to be expected of kids who basically popped into existence due to some bizarre phenomenon.

“...and that about sums it up, yeah? God, listen to me. How does that even *begin* to ‘sum it up’?!” Inaba was now flustered to the point that she was arguing with herself.

If this had been their first experience with these phenomena, they likely would have rejected this conjecture outright—no, perhaps they wouldn’t have made it to this stage in the first place. Perhaps they would have simply taken the girls to the staff room or the police station, then gone to search for Nagase and Kiriyma... After all, that’s what any *normal* person would do, right?

But Taichi and the others hadn’t taken the “normal” course of action—because they knew nothing about this was normal. And «it» would keep coming back, no matter what. And they would be forced to deal with it.

“Is it just me, or is this kinda insane?” Aoki mused aloud.

“Is it rebuilding their bodies on a cellular level? Maybe

even a molecular level... all the way down to their personality and memories...? And it's all perfect, right down to the smallest details... Maybe it transported them here to the future and sent the others back to the past...? No, that can't be it, surely..." Inaba muttered to herself.

"What... are they?" Taichi asked as he watched over his two kid-ified friends.

"Good question. And not one we're likely to find the answer to... All I know is, they aren't meant to be here in our world."

"If they're here with us, then where's the real Yui and Iori-chan?" asked Aoki.

"They might be out there somewhere... or they might not exist anywhere at all... Maybe they've been irreversibly altered—" Inaba paused and furrowed her brows. "Okay, hold on. I know this is going to sound morbid, but hear me out. If one of these kids were to die somehow—in a car accident or whatever—what would happen?"

"Well, then we'd have to report the death of... someone who wasn't supposed to exist... Gah, forget it! I don't want to think about it! I mean, I assume our friends are gonna go back to normal eventually, right?"

Inaba closed her eyes and nodded. "Yeah. I hope so, anyway... That's how it's been up until now, at least."

And up until then, the root cause was always the same—

"As long as «Heartseed»'s behind it, then yeah," Aoki piped up.

«Heartseed»—the culprit who turned their world upside-down. Somehow it always managed to make the impossible very possible indeed.

"Bad news comes in threes... Fuck, this shit doesn't even faze us anymore," Inaba spat.

Then Taichi opened his mouth to speak. "Actually, I..."

I encountered someone else earlier today. Someone who wasn't «Heartseed».

Inaba looked him straight in the eye. "...Well? Gonna

finish that thought?"

Something had possessed Oosawa's body and demanded he make a promise. It hadn't really been that overtly threatening, and yet somehow he could sense that it held all the cards... like it was on a whole different plane of existence. And apparently Taichi was the only one who had encountered it thus far...

He averted his gaze. "Oh, uh... Never mind. It's nothing."

His mind was a jumbled mess. Who was that mysterious entity? In what way was it connected to «Heartseed»? What exactly were the terms of this phenomenon? He didn't know. Maybe there was a hidden depth to that promise... in which case, he was better off delaying his decision until he had a bit more information.

"Fine, whatever. If you figure something out, you'd better tell us, alright?"

At this, he nodded vaguely.

"So, y'know, if this is «Heartseed»'s doing... the rest of us are gonna end up like that at some point, aren't we?" Aoki laughed nervously.

If this was anything like the previous two phenomena...

"We'll be chosen at random... to be turned into our kid selves..." Taichi muttered.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, WAIT!" Inaba panicked.

"C-Calm down, Inabacchan! What's wrong?"

"If this happens randomly... then what if we're out in public when it strikes?! What then?!"

"Whoever it is would turn into a kid in front of everyone... Oh god." The blood drained from Taichi's face as the realization hit him.

"This is a physical change... which means other people can see it..." Inaba's voice quavered with fear. "How are any of us supposed to go outside like this?!"

They struggled to process this new revelation.

"Wait... what? WHAT? But... Holy crap, you're totally right..." Aoki clutched at his hair, slack-jawed.

Just how much were these entities capable of?

"Um, excuse me?" Suddenly, Kiriyma [age 11] tugged on Inaba's sleeve. Beside her stood Nagase [age 6].

"Wh... What's up?"

"Iori-chan has to go to the bathroom, so I'm gonna walk her there, okay?" She proudly thrust out her chest. "Don't worry, I've got it all covered! Okay, let's go!"

"Okie-dokie!"

Hand in hand, the two headed for the door.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, WAIT, you idiots!" Inaba frantically dashed over and blocked their path.

"Huh? What's the matter?" Kiriyma [age 11] tilted her head.

"We can't just let you walk around out there!"

"But—"

"I gotta go pee!" Nagase wailed, shifting from one foot to the other.

"D-Don't talk like that! Stop acting like a child!"

"She *is* a child," Taichi retorted, even though he knew that wasn't the point.

"I'mma go by mysewf!"

"You most certainly are *not*, little missy! We can't have a couple of grade-schoolers walking around the school dressed in Yamaboshi uniforms!"

"B-But I'm gonna peeee...!" Nagase [age 6] looked up at them with tears in her eyes.

"Aaaagh! Goddamn it! Fine! Taichi, Aoki, you two stand outside and block the path to the ladies' room! Stand guard and make sure no one sees us, you hear me?! I'll help her inside!"

Suddenly a harmless trip to the bathroom had become a full-scale undercover operation.

Thankfully, Operation Bathroom Infiltration was a perfect success.

Afterwards they returned to the clubroom. From there, all

that was left to do was nervously watch the clock. There was no telling when the phenomenon might strike the others, too... They tried to plan for it, but with so many variables in the equation, it was next to impossible.

Meanwhile, Nagase [age 6] and Kiriyma [age 11] were busy playing and eating snacks to their hearts' content. Taichi and the others kept a close eye on them, desperately awaiting the moment they'd turn back into their normal selves, but the nightmare showed no signs of ending.

Outside, the sky had darkened considerably.

"They're not going to be stuck like this forever, are they...?" Inaba muttered. She was clearly getting a little antsy, and Taichi didn't blame her.

"No way, right? I mean... that'd be ridiculous."

If that was the case, the phenomenon easily ran the risk of ruining their entire lives.

"Ooh, it's almost five! Finally!" Aoki exclaimed.

Five o'clock—their last hope. Taichi glanced at the clock. Sure enough, the minute hand was just moments away from hitting the 12. Then he glanced back at the chalkboard:

12:00 PM - 5:00 PM

...Maybe it was meant to be an indication of the phenomenon's active hours. After all, Nagase [age 6] and Kiriyma [age 11] had popped into existence precisely at noon. Surely the mystery message had to be more than pure coincidence.

It was a flimsy conjecture with barely any supporting evidence, but right now it was all they had.

Taichi in particular had even more reason to believe in it, of course, considering some unknown entity had said the phrase "noon to five" in his presence earlier that day... but he had yet to tell Inaba or Aoki about it. Truth be told, he got the sense he'd missed his only chance.

"There! It's five!" Aoki shouted.

There was a brief pause, and then—

“Ugh...!”

“Nnn...!”

Nagase [age 6] and Kiriyama [age 11] dropped their playing cards and wrapped their arms around themselves. The next thing they knew—teenage Nagase and Kiriyama were right there.

Taichi froze. At no point had he taken his eyes off either of them—well, maybe for a split-second when he blinked—and yet he somehow missed the point at which they reverted back. Instead, they were just... back to normal, almost as if nothing had ever happened.

“Th-They’re baaack!” Aoki shouted, jumping to his feet.

Inaba stared blankly. “What...? Is that how this works...? What kind of magic is this? Is this even possible? Is this *allowed* to be possible? ...Fuck no! I refuse to accept this bullshit!”

“Huh? What am I doing over here...?” Kiriyama tilted her head in confusion.

Beside her, Nagase blinked. “What the...? What happened to me? And why does my stomach hurt?” Beat. “Wait, what the heck is going on with my panties!?” She began to wrestle with her clothes.

“Gah! Iori-chan!”

“Whoa there, Nagase! Could you maybe not hike up your skirt and fix your wedgie in a room where guys are present!?”

“How about you two meatheads just don’t look in the first place!?” Inaba punched them both squarely between the eyes, sending them tumbling to the floor along with their chairs. “Fucking fuck, what is even *happening* right now!?” She turned and looked at the other two girls. “Do you remember anything that happened over the past five hours?”

They stared blankly back. “Wait... What do you mean, five hours?” Kiriyama asked.

"Holy cow, look how dark it is outside! What time is it?! Five?!" Nagase jumped to her feet in a panic.

"What? It's already five?! How's that possible?! Wasn't it just noon, like, a minute ago?!"

Evidently they had no memory of the time they spent as kid versions of themselves, so Inaba gave them the full rundown of everything that had happened.

At first, Nagase and Kiriyama were convinced the others were lying, but over time, their expressions grew pale.

"I... I was [eleven] again...?"

"And I was [six]...?"

Inaba sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "I'm afraid so... At least, that's what you claimed. Or rather, that's what the kids told us. So apparently you two turned into past versions of yourselves... Alternatively, it's possible you just *switched places* with your past selves, but... Somehow, it makes more logical sense that your bodies physically transformed... Not that any of this is goddamn logical in the first place..."

"Now hold on a minute!" Kiriyama ran a hand over her face and body. "Now *if* this is true—and that's like a big 'if'—my body would've shrunk, right? So what did it do with all the extra muscle tissue and hair and stuff?! Like, this is ridiculous! Are you seriously telling me my body can handle a crazy transformation like that with no side effects?!"

"How the fuck should I know? I don't even want to think about it."

Nagase laughed nervously. "Wow. This is hilarious, huh? Well, I admit I can't remember anything that happened over the past few hours, sooo..." She was clearly trying to keep the conversation lighthearted, but her smile was stiff.

Taichi decided to ask the one thing that worried him the most: "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yeah, I'm okay... I think." Nagase tilted her head. "Oh, huh... On second thought, I do feel a little bit weird."

"How so? Tell us everything, even if it's just a minor

thing.”

“Well, hmm... For some reason—maybe because you guys brought up me being [six years old]—my memories from first grade are really fresh in my mind all of a sudden. It’s weird... Most people probably would’ve forgotten all this stuff by now, y’know?”

“Now that you mention it, it’s totally the same for me, too! Whoa... Especially now that I’m, like, hyper-focused on it... Oh my gosh, this really takes me back! Aww, I got the warm fuzzies!”

“...It brings back old memories, too...?” Inaba muttered. She paused for a moment. “Then that lends even more credence to the ‘physically transformed’ theory... If it was purely a swap, then surely it wouldn’t leave any lingering effects...” As usual, she was already hard at work analyzing the few scraps of information they had. “What about now? Anything from the past few hours coming back to you?” she asked.

“Hmm...” Nagase thought for a moment. “No, I don’t think so. Right now, all I can remember is... being six, and playing with my friends, and going to elementary school, and... family stuff.”

At “family stuff,” her tone shifted slightly. Six years old... That would’ve been right around the time Nagase met her first stepdad—the second of five men Nagase would call her father over the course of her life.

“Actually... come to think of it, I can kinda-sorta remember the mindset I had at the time, too... This is so weird...” Nagase seemed to fall into contemplation.

“It’s totally the same for me. I still can’t accept that I actually transformed, but... either way, I can’t remember what I’ve been up to since noon... and now, like all of a sudden, I keep thinking back to fifth grade... It’s all so fresh and painful... and there’s a tightness in my chest I can’t really explain...” Kiriyama’s face clouded over to match Nagase’s—something Inaba was quick to take notice of.

"Enough reminiscing, both of you. Is there anything else that could give us clues about the phenomenon itself?"

Nagase and Kiriyma paused for a moment, then shook their heads.

"Then forget about all that other stuff. Right now we have more important things to be focusing on," Inaba continued, and Taichi got the sense this wasn't just her rational side talking. After all, she had a habit of hiding her consideration for others' feelings beneath a harsh veneer. "That said... Man, I don't have the first fucking clue where to start!"

Evidently even Inaba was at a loss over this new phenomenon.

"...Well..." Aoki piped up awkwardly, "if there's one thing we can say for sure... round three's officially started, huh?"

As for what he meant by that, there was no need to ask.

Inaba got to her feet and put a hand to the chalkboard. "Is it safe to assume this timeframe is the established duration for the transformation? And once someone transforms, will they stay in that form the entire five hours, or will we all transform back and forth purely at random? And... why exactly isn't Taichi's name on here...? Well, either way..." She turned back to face the others. "I think it's safe to assume that «Heartseed»'s back, up to his fuckery again. For now, let's call it... Age Regression."

Silence fell over the room, and for a moment the only sound was that of the heater, hard at work. All at once, Taichi became keenly aware of the dark, oppressive vibe hanging over the room. Memories of the two past phenomena floated to the forefront of his mind. Then, slowly, it all sank in, weighing him down like a ton of bricks.

"Uggghhh... I hate this... It's still hard to believe it really happened..." Nagase muttered, her cheek pressed to the table.

"Not again, not again, not again! UGH!" Kiriyma grumbled loudly.

"Third time's the charm, maybe...?" Aoki asked hopefully.

"If only we should be so lucky... Hah, 'lucky.' As if," Inaba replied.

They were now faced with their third phenomenon. What did the future hold? Would this simply become their new normal? The thought sent a shiver down Taichi's spine.

Another moment of silence slowly passed—until Nagase mercifully shattered it.

"Aw, we'll figure it out! We always do!" Her tone was bright and cheerful, drawing everyone's attention.

Then Aoki joined in. "Yeah! We're unstoppable!"

Kiryama clenched her fist in front of her face, her expression steely. "It still doesn't feel real to me, but... I'll give it everything I've got."

"One thing's for sure: we won't get anywhere by standing around and whining," Inaba remarked dryly.

Just like that, they turned around and sent the crushing darkness right back from whence it had come. They were scared, but together they were strong—stronger than ever before. No matter how insurmountable the obstacle in front of them, the Cultural Research Club was ready to tackle it.

Then they turned to look at Taichi.

"Oh, uh... Ditto?"

Instantly, the four of them slumped their shoulders in exasperation.

"Oh, come on! You could've done better than that! You were supposed to finish us off!" Nagase pouted her lips.

Inaba sighed. "Well... it's nothing if not in character for him, I guess. Anyway, back to the topic at hand... I think it's safe to go home for the night. Sound good?"

It was a surprising suggestion from typically hyper-cautious Inaba.

"Ya sure about this, Inabacchan?" Aoki asked. "There's no tellin' what'll happen if it strikes again."

"Well, the chalkboard says 'noon to five,' and sure enough, today Lori and Yui stayed in their Regressed forms precisely from noon to five. From this, I think it's safe to

assume that the Regression will only take place during those hours.”

“Isn’t it a little early to make assumptions like that?” Nagase asked.

“You’re not wrong, but... somehow I doubt that fucker would make us ruin our entire lives without even stopping by to explain the rules.”

She had a point... in theory. «Heartseed» claimed its role was that of an observer, watching to see how the five members of the CRC would fare under the supernatural effects of its various phenomena. Above all, it wanted to be “entertained.”

Nagase nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. If it was going to be that unpredictable, «Heartseed» would probably tell us in advance.”

“Mmhmm. If going home is such a huge risk, then I imagine it’ll turn up to warn us any moment now.”

For a moment, everyone waited with baited breath. A few seconds of silence ticked by.

Nothing happened.

“And there you have it. We’re good to go. Hell, that’s probably why it bothered to leave us this *lovely* message!” Inaba slammed her fist against the chalkboard.

“I don’t like this... I hate that our only option is to just believe literally whatever it tells us...” Kiriyama muttered, conflicted.

“At the very least, I doubt it’ll let anything catastrophic happen before it turns up to explain things...” Inaba’s voice faltered. “But that’s not guaranteed.”

“No, I think you’re right,” Nagase declared.

“Me too,” Kiriyama, Aoki, and Taichi replied in unison.

“You’re all better off taking my speculation with a grain of salt, but... I do appreciate the support.”

In the end, Taichi never told them what was on his mind the entire time—the possibility that the culprit was not, in fact, «Heartseed»—something that would shatter the

foundation of their entire existing framework.

And so it was decided that they'd meet up again the next day at Inaba's house, just before noon. With that, everyone headed home.

Alone, Taichi reflected on everything that had happened. Nagase and Kiriyama had Regressed into children; there was no use trying to claim that such a thing had to be impossible, because clearly it wasn't. All they could do now was accept their current reality... and come up with a plan to handle it.

He believed Inaba's logic was sound, and yet he couldn't help but feel on edge, wondering when the Regression might strike next. Maybe this time it would choose him.

On top of the usual anxiety, he now had something else to worry about: the fact that some entity had spoken to him directly. Not only that, but his name wasn't listed on the chalkboard, either... Somehow he got the feeling that this phenomenon would play out a bit differently from the other two—particularly for him.

Before he knew it, he'd arrived safely at home. He exhaled into the cold, wintry air and felt his tension subside ever so slightly. Granted, he knew he shouldn't let his guard down, but home was far more secure than outside, at least. This was the one place he felt completely safe.

"I'm home!"

As soon as he stepped inside, he heard the pitter-patter of light footsteps headed his way.

"You're LATE! You promised you'd be home early today!" Rina's little doe eyes glinted with annoyance as she fixed him with a glare. Her wavy hair was tied back in a low ponytail, suggesting she'd been helping out in the kitchen.

"S-Sorry... Something came up."

"What could possibly be more important than your adorable little sister?! Hmph!"

Evidently his absence had put her in a bad mood.

“Well, it *is* Christmas and all. I’m sure ‘something’ ‘came up’ with your *girlfriend* or whatever!”

“I told you, she’s *not* my girlfriend!”

“Seriously?! You both obviously like each other, so why don’t you just make it official?! You’re such a *child*, Taichi!”

“Maybe *you* think it’s normal to rush into a relationship, but *I* prefer to take my time with this stuff!”

You don’t get to call me a child! You’re in grade school!

“So you didn’t even give her a Christmas present?”

“Er... No...”

Even supposing he had a gift to give, which one would he give it to? He couldn’t just give one to both of them; that would be a cop-out.

“Good grief, you’re so hopeless! Well, if you’re not gonna get her anything, then I hope you’ll spend your money on me instead, dearest brother!”

“Fair enough... Wait, how is that fair? That doesn’t follow at all!”

Lately he was starting to get the feeling he was raising her into quite the spoiled little hellion... No, no, that wasn’t possible. Surely she would stay as pure and angelic as the day she was born!

Rina turned on her heel and headed down the hall; Taichi kicked off his shoes and followed after her. Then, suddenly, she stopped short.

“Excuse me, would you mind—”

But when she turned around, the words died in his throat.

Her eyes were empty and lifeless.

All at once, he knew something was wrong. Very wrong.

No. Not here. That’s... That’s not allowed.

This was the one place that was meant to be safe.

Silently, he prayed it was all just a misunderstanding.

Unfortunately, that didn’t make it any less real.

“Who... are you...?”

This was supposed to stay between «Heartseed» and the CRC. The rest of the world was supposed to be safe. This

house was supposed to be safe. *His sister was supposed to be safe.*

“Who?” The entity tilted his sister’s head.

“I know you’re not «Heartseed».”

“Not? False. I, too, am «Heartseed».” It spoke in a slow, lilting, airy voice—nothing like Rina’s usual tone.

“What? You are? But everything about you is so different from the «Heartseed» I’m used to... Is «Heartseed» the name of your species or something?”

At this point, he’d accepted that his sister was now possessed by an otherworldly being. But instead of screaming and running for the door, he was instead calmly holding a conversation with this alien entity. Everything about this was abnormal—himself included.

“Oh... I see.” It nodded. “In that case... I am... the next «Heartseed»... «The Second». Yes, I am «The Second». Do you understand?”

“Your name is... «The Second»?”

“Yes... Acceptable?”

“I mean, you hardly need my permission...” *Do these things not have their own names or what? At least this one seems to know the other «Heartseed»...* “You possessed Oosawa earlier today, right?” he asked, just to make sure.

“Yes, we met today before noon. So far, so good... but tomorrow is still yet to come.”

“Wait—what do you mean, tomorrow?”

“Same as today. At noon, someone among those four will take the form of a child. At five, they will turn back.”

“The Age Regression phenomenon? Are you the one who’s controlling it?”

“Yes.”

It wasn’t «Heartseed» after all. Though it seemed similar at first glance, this was almost assuredly a different kettle of fish.

Fighting to control his trembling body, Taichi decided to ask it the question that had struck him regarding its

statement just prior.

“When you say ‘those four,’ does that mean I’m not part of this?”

“...If all of you were turned to children... things would get... complicated... worst case scenario... fall apart.”

It had a point there.

“Why me? Why am I the exception?”

“Why? Why? There is no *why*.”

So it chose me purely at random? Fitting, I suppose.

Before he could ask his next question, «The Second» continued, “You must maintain control of the situation. I will have no part in this. It is up to you. I will... observe... and set things into place.”

Another observer, just like the first. But this phenomenon would be of the “sink or swim” variety... save for one designated lifeguard.

Like the original «Heartseed», «The Second» sucked at explaining things, so Taichi was forced to fill in the blanks himself.

“Also, do not tell anyone of my presence. This is very important. You must keep this promise. If you break your word... it will get much harder.”

Harder how?

“What’s your objective, anyway? Where’s «Heartseed»? And how do you two know each other?”

«The Second» simply blinked back blankly as Taichi unloaded all his other questions at once. “...I am told «Heartseed» considers you fascinating. As for me, I am far more interested in your relationship with «Heartseed». It is most unusual.”

“Okay, but what’s your end goal here?”

“...Good question.”

“Gimme a break. You don’t even know your own objective?”

At least «Heartseed» seemed to have one, even if the CRC hadn’t figured out what it was yet.

Wait—

“So... How long will this last?”

«The Second» froze. After a few seconds, it replied, “Until I find my answer?”

His sight dimmed. When would he finally wake from this aimless dream?

“...We will meet again.”

“What?”

The sudden farewell caught him off guard. But before he could react—

“...Huh? Why are we standing around in the hall?”

—the abnormality vanished.

“What the hell?!”

As usual, he didn’t get a say in any of it.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?” Rina asked, her expression sparkling with energy once more.

“Oh, uh... it’s nothing.”

“Hmph. Whatever.”

A cold sweat trickled down his back as he watched her retreat into the living room.

«Heartseed» was an illogical creature, but at least it followed its own sort of code. As for «The Second», there was no guarantee it shared the same beliefs... and like «Heartseed», its powers were limitless. If it so desired, it could easily put them in mortal danger—something Taichi knew all too well.

«Heartseed» had never shown itself to carry any intention of hurting them—but could the same be said of «The Second»? Was it planning to only ever show itself around Taichi specifically? And if so, was it little more than a simple preference, or was there some deeper significance behind it?

But most of all...

What the hell do I do now?

+ + +

That night, Nagase Iori called up Inaba Himeko.

“...Is it really true...? Did I really turn into a kid? Completely?”

“Yep. Completely... At least, I think so, anyway.”

“Weird... Okay, well... about that...”

“What is it?”

“Umm... Do you think maybe... being around my old self will make Taichi like me less?”

“I don’t think he’s that kind of guy... I’m ninety-nine percent sure, anyway.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right... Probably...”

“Yeah... Probably...”

“Yup...”

“...Pfffft.”

“Hahahahaha!”

“Bahahaha! Shit, listen to us! We’re not girly enough for this half-assed girl talk! And we’re both crushing on the same guy, anyway! What a joke!”

“I know, right? I never dreamed I’d be having this conversation with you!”

“Never? Come on. I *am* technically a girl, you know! ...Man, this is some predicament we’ve put ourselves in. You know, I hear polyamory is in vogue these days. Why don’t we just make it official and go the *ménage à trois* route?”

“Wow, I guess you’ve really had a change of heart... or so you want me to think! This is just a clever ploy to make me let my guard down, isn’t it?!”

“Wink wink!”

“Inaban! Since when do *you* of all people say ‘wink’ out loud?!”

“...Yeah, you’re right. That was a little too weird, even for me. I don’t have the best grasp on these things... Just forget I said it...”

“Aww, man! I wish I could see your face right now! I bet you’re sooo embarrassed!”

As she spoke, Nagase did her best to keep her tone as

bright and cheerful as possible.

Anything to keep their freakish reality at bay just one minute longer.

Chapter 2: Once Upon A Time

The next day, Taichi left home quite a bit earlier than usual. After all, he couldn't afford to be late.

Even if the phenomenon didn't apply to him (allegedly), it still applied to everyone else in the club, and someone needed to be around to watch the kids. Otherwise—to borrow «The Second»'s turn of phrase—"things would get complicated."

But... could they really take «The Second» at its word? It didn't *appear* to be lying, of course, but they had no way to verify it one way or the other.

Still, at the very least, no one had experienced any Age Regression from 5:00 PM yesterday right up until that morning. He'd contacted each of them to make sure.

"Maybe I came a little too early..."

It was only eleven, and he'd already arrived at the train station nearest Inaba's house. Yes, Inaba, the same girl who had confessed her love to him. Admittedly the thought of going to her house made him a little nervous.

His feelings lay with Nagase. He'd told her as much. But... maybe a sizeable part of it was directly inspired by the knowledge that Nagase had feelings for him in kind... and now that he knew Inaba had feelings for him as well....

Sometimes he was tempted to reject her point-blank and commit to Nagase one-hundred percent. Still, he couldn't bear to hurt someone who obviously cared about him so deeply. As it stood, neither of them had outright demanded that he choose between them... and so he used that as an excuse to take his sweet time deciding.

He knew it couldn't stay like this forever... and yet...
As he passed through the turnstiles, he spotted a familiar

long-haired figure.

“Hey, Kiriyma!”

“Oh! Good morning, Taichi!” She waved back, clad in an oversized duffel coat, a large tote bag hanging from her arm.

“You’re a little early, don’t you think?”

Kiriyma chuckled softly. “So are you, loser.”

She seemed... tired.

“You haven’t Regressed at all since yesterday, right?”

“Nope, doesn’t look like it... I was worried it might strike me again, but I guess it’s gonna stick to the same timeframe every time... I still don’t understand how it even works, y’know? ‘Cuz I haven’t seen it for myself yet.”

“Ah, yeah, that makes sense... Anything else weird happen to you?”

He figured he may as well ask, just in case she was getting house calls from «The Second», too.

“Nope... Can’t think of anything...” She yawned.

“A little sleep-deprived this morning, are we?”

“I just didn’t get to bed till late... Part of it was anxiety, and part of it was... well...” She fell silent, idly twirling a strand of chestnut hair around her finger. “I was doing a lot of thinking, you know. Reminiscing.”

Kiriyma was always an emotionally sensitive girl. Judging from her experiences with the previous phenomena, they tended to affect her a little more strongly than the others, so Taichi couldn’t help but worry about her a little more.

“Reminiscing, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s weird—even after I got home, my stupid brain was still full of old memories and stuff... so I was, like, *reflecting on it*, you know? I mean... a lot’s changed.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Mmm... I dunno... just... a lot!” Kiriyma flailed her arms in frustration. “You try it, then! How do *you* describe the difference between the old you and the current you?”

“The *difference*? I don’t know... I mean, I was just a kid back then. A lot of things are ‘different’ now.”

“Ha! You said ‘a lot’! I win!”

“Fine, you won... I don’t remember agreeing to play this game, though...”

“Hee hee! Yeah, me either.”

The two of them chuckled.

“Sooo, yeah... There’s just... a lot to process, you know?” she muttered quietly. Her words felt... affectionately sentimental. “Anyway! What should we do, Taichi? Inaba probably won’t appreciate us showing up this early, right?”

“Yeah, probably not... Let’s just find a place to kill some time.”

Neither of them managed to think of a decent spot off the top of their heads, so they decided to mill about the neighborhood.

The sky was calm and bright, without a cloud to be seen. On days like these, they scarcely even felt the cold.

Shortly after they’d decided it was time to head over to Inaba’s place, Kiriymama suddenly stopped short.

“I remember this street...”

A large, empty lot had been fenced off, likely for rezoning purposes. Around it stood a handful of neglected buildings.

“Yeah?”

“Back when I was still part of the dojo, we’d always come down this way during our daily run.”

“Dojo? Oh, your karate club, right? I forget—when did you stop going?”

“Eighth grade. You know, right after that man tried to rape me and all.”

Oh crap. He’d stumbled headfirst into a touchy subject.

“Right... Sorry.”

Kiriymama shook her head. “No, it’s cool. It’s in the past, you know? I’ve come a long way since then.”

Indeed, as the days passed, Taichi got the sense that her phobia of men had since dwindled to a mild discomfort.

“Still, a ton of stuff has changed since then... That empty

lot wasn't there back then... Oh, and that store wasn't closed down before..."

"I'm impressed you still remember. Is this place special to you?"

"No, not really... Why *do* I remember all this stuff? Must be a side effect from the thing that happened yesterday... You know, since I apparently Regressed to [age 11] and all... Oh god, I just remembered something else—"

"Kiriyama!"

Out of nowhere, a feminine voice called after them. Startled, the two of them spun around to find a teenage girl standing there.

Decked out in a bomber jacket, jeans, and a mid-high ponytail, it was clear her style was crafted for comfort and mobility. She looked to be around their age or perhaps a bit older; her angular features afforded her an unapproachable air, particularly in combination with the sharp glare on her face, pointed in their—no, Kiriyama's—direction.



"Uhh... Do I know you...?" Kiriyama asked timidly.

"Excuse me? Don't tell me you've forgotten who I am," the girl hissed as she walked up to them.

"Huh? Wait... Are you... Mihashi Chinatsu...?"

"Duh! Why'd you take so long to recognize me?"

"Well, you've really grown up since I saw you last. Your whole vibe is different now..."

"...Whatever. So who's this dude? Your boyfriend?"

At this, Kiriyama descended into a full-blown panic—so quintessential, Taichi would've liked to put it in the dictionary under "flustered."

Once she regained her composure, she introduced the two of them.

"So, this is Yaegashi Taichi-kun. He's in the same club as me, and we were just on our way to a friend's house. He's not my boyfriend, okay? Absolutely one hundred percent definitely not my boyfriend or anything like that."

"I think she gets the picture..."

Did she really hate the thought of being mistaken for his girlfriend, or was she just embarrassed? For his pride's sake, Taichi decided to let himself believe it was the latter.

"And this is Mihashi Chinatsu-san. She's my... uh... friend... who used to go to the same karate competitions as me..."

"I'm not your *friend*," Mihashi shot back.

"Oh..." Kiriyama whimpered.

This Mihashi person didn't seem to like Kiriyama much at all; nevertheless, Kiriyama did her best to sound excited to see her. "A-Anyway, long time no see, huh? I haven't seen you at all since you moved away back in eighth grade—"

"I'm not here for your small talk, Kiriyama," Mihashi interrupted coldly. "Now listen here... You haven't quit karate or something, right?" she asked in a low, pained voice. For a moment, Kiriyama froze, and Mihashi glared at her fiercely... almost imploringly. "*Right?*"

Finally, Kiriyama found her voice. "Yeah... I quit."

Mihashi's eyes widened in shock. "No way... You're

kidding, right? I mean, I heard rumors that Little Miss Child Prodigy Kiriyama had left the scene, but..."

Once upon a time, Kiriyama's superior reflexes and overwhelming skill had helped her make a name for herself as a formidable veteran of women's full-contact karate.

"...I'm sorry, but... it's the truth. I quit a long time ago."

"But... what about our *promise*!?" Mihashi shouted. Her tone had shot up several octaves.

"Our... promise...?" Kiriyama repeated quizzically.

For a moment, Mihashi looked utterly destroyed. Then her vibe darkened into one of gloom and misery. "Why...?" she asked in a tiny voice. "Was it... an injury?"

"No, I wasn't injured or anything like that."

"...Then why?"

"I... I just didn't have a choice, that's all."

"What? What do you mean, you *didn't have a choice*?" Mihashi pressed.

Kiryama was clearly not equipped to handle this. "Well... uh..."

Up until then, Taichi had chosen to stay out of the conversation out of respect for their personal circumstances, but he couldn't let it slide any longer. Besides, they were running short on time.

"Sorry, but could you guys hash it out some other time, maybe? Kiriyama, we gotta get going."

"You stay out of this!" Mihashi snapped, boring through him with her fierce glare.

"Look, I know whatever's between you is none of my business, but we've got stuff to do today." He moved to grab Kiriyama's hand.

"No!" Kiriyama shrieked, jerking her hand away from his.

Crap. He should've known better than to try to initiate physical contact with her. In his panic, he'd just trampled right over her boundaries. "Er... Sorry about that."

"Oh, uh... No, it's fine. I'm sorry, too."

"What is *with* you two?" Mihashi asked, casting a dubious

look in their direction.

"L-Look, I'm sorry to cut this short, alright? We're kind of in a hurry." This time he grabbed the corner of the tote bag on her arm and gave it a tug, willing Kiriyama to come with him.

"Hold it! I'm not done with you!"

"Listen, um... We really have to go... I'm sorry!" Kiriyama blurted out, eyes averted, as she left Mihashi standing there.

"I refuse to accept this!" Mihashi shouted after them with all the venom she could muster.



"So what's the story between you and her?" Taichi asked as they hurried down the street in the direction of Inaba's house.

"We were both learning the same style of karate... She went to a different dojo, but we'd always meet up at competitions and stuff..." Kiriyama mumbled, her eyes on the ground.

"So she's an old friend, basically?"

"Yeah... Well, maybe 'rival' is a better term..."

"Whoa... I never knew you had your own rival. That sounds awesome."

"It was pretty awesome... once upon a time, anyway." Her tone was a complex mix of emotions. "But then Mihashi-san moved really far away, and our karate style doesn't hold nationals at the middle school level, so I never saw her anymore... and then eventually I had to quit karate, so..."

"Right. So what's she doing back here?"

"No idea. Maybe she moved back or something..."

It sounded like Mihashi was a treasured old friend, and yet Kiriyama didn't seem too happy about their reunion. Not that Taichi really blamed her, considering Mihashi was acting hostile the entire time. If anything, he worried that their encounter had had a negative effect on Kiriyama's

emotional well-being. After all, they were in the midst of (what they referred to as) the Age Regression phenomenon. Who knew what sort of problems it might exacerbate.

A moment later, a cheerful voice sang out, “Good *morning!*” Nagase Iori jogged over wearing jeans, a lavender down jacket, and a beanie with ear flaps. “Hmm... I notice you two came from the opposite direction as the train station... Did the two of you go off somewhere else? Wait... Taichi... Don’t tell me you’re trying to add both Inaban *and* Yui to your harem!”

It was a subject Taichi immediately wished she hadn’t brought up.

“Huh? What was that about Inaba?” Kiriayama asked, a giant question mark practically written on her face.

“Nothing! It’s nothing, okay?! Same goes for you, Nagase! We were just killing time!”

Neither of the other two knew that Inaba had confessed her feelings to him, creating a love triangle between him, her, and Nagase. (He’d asked them to keep it private, but neither of them seemed to care if anyone found out. What a headache.)

“I dunno... If you’re talented enough to make Inaban fall for you, I’m starting to think you might be omnipotent...”

“*What?* You made Inaba fall for you?”

“I told you, Kiriayama, it’s nothing! Nagase, you’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?!”

“I can’t help it! You’re hilarious when you’re flustered,” Nagase snickered, evidently pleased with herself.

Together, the three of them set off down the road, and Taichi stole a glance at Nagase beside him. She and Inaba appeared to have come to an agreement over the situation, but... deep down, how did she actually feel about it?

Over the course of the past month following the end of the Liberation phenomenon, Nagase had seemed perfectly normal. In fact, at times it felt like she’d gone back to the way she was before the two of them had ever confessed

their feelings for each other. There was a point at which the two of them had struggled to figure out how to interact with each other post-confession, but now Nagase was treating him like a good friend... as if nothing had ever happened. This was part of the reason he was having trouble making his decision official.

"Hmm? What's up, Taichi? Something on my face?"

"N-No! Not at all!"

What was she really thinking behind that bright, innocent smile?

"Oh, I know! Were you *reveling* in my sheer beauty?
Hmmm?"

"Wh-Whoa! Back up a bit!"

Seriously, what is she thinking?

Once the five of them were all present and accounted for, Inaba let out a huge sigh. "I'll be honest. I said I'd be fine going home by myself, but frankly, I wasn't fine. I was scared out of my mind, worrying my hypothesis might be wrong."

"Dang, Inabacchan, that's badass! You call all the shots and never let your anxiety stop you!" said Aoki Yoshifumi as he lay sprawled out in full-on Relaxation Mode.

Personally, Taichi felt Aoki's unflappable composure in the face of the unknown was pretty badass, too.

Inaba's room was still just as plain and functional as he remembered it, with one exception: he got the sense the room was a bit more colorful than it used to be. That, and he never would have pegged Inaba as the type to sleep with a big heart-print pillow.

"It's almost noon... Man, it still hasn't hit me that round three's started..." Nagase murmured as she sat occupying the bed.

"Just wait until you see it. It's terrifying... Personally, I wish I didn't have to see it again, but I doubt I'll be so lucky," Inaba replied. "I wish there was something we could do to prevent it, but alas... It seems all we can do is wait."

"Are ya sure it'll happen a second time? I still can't believe it..." said Aoki.

"It's nice to know when it'll strike for a change... Ugh... I'm kinda hungry..." grumbled Nagase.

Kiryama perked up. "Wait... Inaba... Are you sure it's safe to do this at your house?"

"Yeah. As far as I know, no one else will come home until after five, so we don't have to worry about anyone walking in on our kid selves and freaking out," Inaba answered.

"That said... this assumes the phenomenon will actually end at five like it's supposed to..." She checked the time on her cell phone. "Almost noon... Oh, what the? A phone call?! Who the hell is it?!" She hastily picked up. "What do you want, buttface?! Make it quick!"

Taichi could tell from her overtly hostile attitude that the caller was her older brother.

"Yeah? Okay... Wait, what?! You're out of your mind. You want me to leave so you can bring some girl over?! Fuck no! I'm busy with someth—"

Even as she spoke, Inaba's cell phone hit the floor with a dull thud.

"Nnggh...!" With one hand clutching at her chest, she used the other to clumsily hit the End Call button.

"Huh? Inaban?! You okay?!" Nagase jumped to her feet in alarm.

Beside her, Aoki started to groan. "Nngh... Yeah, uh... Not a fan of this..."

"A-Aoki?!" Kiryama shrieked.

The next instant, Inaba and Aoki shrank. No, "shrank" wasn't the best way to describe it. Rather, it was as if a higher power had randomly swapped Inaba with a preschooler and Aoki with a fifth or sixth grade elementary school student.

Naturally, this elicited a strong reaction from Nagase and Kiryama, neither of whom had been present (so to speak) to see it the first time—

“NOOOOO WAAAAAAAY!”
“Wh-Wh-What just HAPPENED?!”
“HOLY CRAP!”
“AAAAAAAHHHH!”

Eventually the initial shock subsided and the girls settled down.

When asked for their ages, Aoki proudly declared “I’m ten years old!” and Inaba lisped “Fouw,” in a small voice.

Next on the agenda was to get the kids some better-fitting clothes. Inaba had instructed them all to bring the smallest clothes they could find, and what a foresight that was proving to be. As usual, she was one step ahead of the rest.

(As a side note, when Taichi asked Rina to lend him some of her clothes, she responded “Creep! Pervert! What would you even use them for?! I liked you better when you were *normal!* Now I hate you!” and he very nearly lost the will to live.)

Meanwhile, Nagase furrowed her brows as she crouched down in front of Inaba [age 4]. “Hmmm... We got away with just rolling up the sleeves and pant legs for Aoki’s tracksuit, but I’m not so sure about this one...”

Next to Taichi, Aoki [age 10] threw both hands up in the air in celebration. “Woohoo! Check me out!”

Naturally, no one happened to have any clothes for a four-year-old handy, and so Inaba [age 4] ended up practically drowning in an oversized, rolled-up shirt that Kiriyama had picked out. As Nagase fixed her clothing for her, she quietly stared back, her eyes as wide as saucers.

“Y’know... I gotta say...” Kiriyama muttered through gritted teeth, and Taichi worried the utter insanity of their circumstances was pushing her toward a mental breakdown

— “Isn’t wittle bitty Inaba, like, TOTALLY ADORBS?!”

—Never mind.

"I know, right?! Look at her big ol' eyes and chubby little cheeks! *Sho kyute!*"

The two girls excitedly began to poke and prod every inch of the preschooler's body.

"Awww! She's sooo cuuuute! You can totally tell she'll grow up to be an ice queen, but at the same time she still has that special cuteness only kids can pull off... It's the perfect contrast!"

"It's killing me to think that this is the same Inaban, you know?! *Oh my goddd!*"

As Kiriyama and Nagase continued to work themselves into a frenzy, the otherwise quiet and well-behaved Inaba [age 4] began to look around the room, silently pleading for someone to rescue her.

Meanwhile, the two boys watched this unfold from a safe distance.

"Man, girls are scary," Aoki [age 10] mused aloud.

Damn it, guys, quit traumatizing the children!

"Whew... That was great..."

"Yeah... Got my daily dose of cute..."

Some time later, after a considerable amount of cuddling, nuzzling, and other unwanted affection, Nagase and Kiriyama finally set Inaba [age 4] free. The moment they did, Inaba [age 4] was so frightened, she immediately ran and hid behind Taichi.

"Aww, c'mon, Himeko-chan! We're not that scary, are we?" Nagase asked in a soft, coaxing voice, but Inaba [age 4] clung to Taichi's pant leg and refused to let go.

The girls had agreed it felt weird to call a small child by their surname, so they'd decided to refer to the kids by their given names instead.

"Maybe you guys shouldn't treat her like a toy."

"Nngh... You're right. I'm sorry."

"I... I'm sorry, too... Sorry, Himeko-chan," Kiriyama chimed in.

As for Aoki [age 10], he was behaving himself and quietly

reading manga from Inaba's bookshelf.

"Man, you guys weren't kidding. They literally turned into kids... That's crazy..." Nagase murmured, staring up at the ceiling. "Wait..." She suddenly turned back to the others. "I feel like we're forgetting something."

"Like what?"

"Like, uhh... Wasn't Inaban on the phone just beforehand?"

"Oh yeah!" Kiriyma exclaimed. "Come to think of it, it sounded like her brother was asking her to leave so he could bring a girl over..."

Nagase snapped her fingers. "Yeah, that!"

"Well, if her brother's coming home, that means he might find us here with the kids..." Taichi muttered, glancing down at Inaba [age 4], who blinked back at him curiously.

This was no minor issue.

"By Jove, if only Inaban hadn't Regressed, I daresay we might have managed! Alas, quite the sticky wicket, innit!" declared Nagase in her best British accent.

"What about your house, Iori?" Kiriyma asked, panicked.

"Hmmm... My mom's not home right now, but she'll definitely be back before five."

"What about you, Taichi?"

"I can't guarantee my family will stay gone until after five... but maybe we could hide in my room..."

"Okay, but if they do see us, are they gonna be cool with you bringing home two girls, a ten-year-old boy, and a preschooler?" Kiriyma asked firmly.

"Mmm... My mom probably wouldn't care, but my sister absolutely would."

"Wow... Your mom wouldn't even care?" Kiriyma gazed at him with sympathy in her eyes.

"Maybe the clubroom...? No, we'll totally draw attention to ourselves if we try to take the kids on campus... Hmmm... We need someplace hidden from the public eye... Okay, what about... a karaoke room?" Nagase suggested.

“Ooh, that sounds good! Let’s do that!”

“But if we go in with two kids, then come out with *zero* kids, won’t they look at us weird...? Crap,” Taichi muttered.

That was another thing they’d have to take into consideration: Inaba [age 4] and Aoki [age 10] would (probably) turn back to their teenage selves at five o’clock.

“Okay then, what if we took them to a love hotel?” Nagase suggested.

At that, Aoki [age 10] looked up from the manga. “What? A love hotel?”

“Oh, sure, *now* you pay attention, you pervy little monkey!” Kiriyama snapped.

“There’s no way they’d let a bunch of minors book a room,” Taichi mused. A moment later, a certain empty street flickered through his mind. “Oh, I know! Say, Kiriyama—what about that area we passed through earlier today?”

“Ohhh, I get it! Makes sense, but... will we be able to get inside, you think? Once we’re in, that would work pretty well as long as we can stay warm somehow.”

“Uh, hello? You two gonna clue me in or what?”

“You’ll see when we get there. For now, let’s head over there. Ao—er, Yoshifumi-kun, put the manga away. We’re leaving.”

“Aww, c’mon! Can’t it wait until I’m finished?”

“No it can’t!” Kiriyama smacked the floor in frustration. Evidently their rapport stayed the same regardless of age.

“Whoa. This place is kinda cool!” Nagase exclaimed as she looked around the room.

The five of them had made it inside one of the derelict buildings located on the dilapidated little street Taichi and Kiriyama had passed through earlier that day. This four-story building was only recently abandoned, and the interior was still fairly clean. Constructed with ferrocement, it was relatively insulated from the cold, too. If it wasn’t for the “Slated For Demolition” sign attached to the fence out front,

they likely never would've guessed it was abandoned at all.

"This kinda feels like a secret hideout. If I was a little kid, I'd probably be so stoked right now," Aoki [age 10] commented.

At this, Taichi and Nagase exchanged a glance and bit back their laughter.

"Wh-What're you guys laughing at?!"

"Trust me, you're nowhere near grown up yet," Nagase replied with a grin.

"Tch... Neither are you!"

"Very funny, tough guy! I'm *super* grown up, I'll have you know!"

"Oh yeah? Have you kissed anybody before?"

"K-Kissed anybody? *Kissed anybody?*! KISSED ANYBODY?!" Nagase blushed and glanced at Taichi out of the corner of her eye, and he felt his face grow hot. "O-Of course I've kissed before! I mean, it wasn't with my own lips—but it totally still counts, right? Okay, maybe not a hundred percent... maybe closer to seventy percent or so! But that still counts, right?!"

Apparently Nagase and Aoki [age 10] got along like a house on fire. It helped that she was willing to treat a child like an equal. (Either that, or she was mentally on the same level as a grade schooler... but Taichi sincerely hoped not.)

As with the previous Regression affecting Nagase and Kiriyama, neither Aoki [age 10] nor Inaba [age 4] seemed the least bit confused as to what they were doing there. Taichi couldn't imagine how they'd chosen to interpret this situation, being kids and all, but sure enough, they seemed to simply accept their surroundings without question.

"Is it really safe for us to be outside, though? If one of us had Regressed on our way here, it would've been, like, totally catastrophic!" Kiriyama said as she stepped into the room.

"Yeah... I guess we're operating under the assumption that there won't be any more transforming until five."

"True... And to be fair, we've been right about that so far."

Indeed, chances were good this assumption was a safe one. Thus far, they had yet to witness anyone transforming outside of precisely noon and precisely five o'clock. For a series of largely "random" phenomena, it felt a little too... predictable.

"Well, at least now we've found our way into this little hideout, so I'd say it's working out nicely so far. It's still dirty, but not, like, *that* dirty, you know?" Kiriyama mused, tracing a finger in the dust on the floor.

"Yeah. We're lucky there was an open first-floor window or else we probably would've ended up in an older, crappier place. Wouldn't want to have to smash our way in, after all."

Granted, they were already technically committing a crime just by trespassing onto the property... but surely karma would let it slide in times of emergency, right?

At that point, Inaba [age 4] burst into a coughing fit as she clung to Taichi's leg. "You okay?" Taichi asked, peering down at her, and she nodded back at him.

"Maybe we should tidy up one of these rooms. We can't have poor Himeko-chan breathing in all this dust!"

And so, at Kiriyama's suggestion, they cleaned up a room on the second floor that, if the eight old and weathered desks lined up side-by-side were any indication, used to be some sort of office.

"I bought some drinks and snacks and stuff!" Nagase announced as she returned from her little shopping excursion. (They were starting to feel confident in their theory that no one else would Regress for the day.)

"What's with that big box?" Taichi asked.

Nagase gleefully dug it out of the bag. "It's a lantern-style table lamp! Now we won't have to worry about it getting dark in here!"

"You didn't have to go out of your way to buy that, you know."

She snickered. “Yeah, I know, but it was on clearance at the hardware store! Once we don’t need it anymore, I’ll just use it to decorate my room or something.”

Why was she so taken with that weird-looking lamp? As usual, Nagase was a total enigma.

After a moment, she spun on her heel, holding a drink in each hand. “Okay, Himeko-chan. Which one of these do you want?”

“Dis one. Owange.”

“Sure thing! Here you go!”

Nagase handed the bottle to Inaba [age 4], who accepted it gingerly. Now that the two teens had stopped treating her like a toy, the little girl was starting to warm up to them—

“I can’t take it... Inaban’s little lisp is *shooo kyuuute...!*”

—So much for that. Inaba [age 4] promptly ran back between Taichi’s legs.

“Stop that! You’re scaring her again!” Taichi reprimanded.

“Nnngh... It’s weirdly frustrating, seeing her so attached to you...” Pouting, Nagase took a sip of her own drink.

“Here you go. Thanks for helping us, Yoshifumi-kun.”

Kiriyama handed Aoki [age 10] his drink and ruffled his hair.

“Thank you,” Aoki [age 10] replied, his tone slightly bashful.

“...You cool with doing that?” Taichi asked Kiriyama quietly. By “that,” he meant “physically touching a boy,” and Kiriyama seemed to intuit this.

“Sure. He’s just a kid, you know?” Kiriyama smiled contentedly.

“Heh heh heh! Can’t wait to tell Nana I made friends with her big sister!” Aoki [age 10] exclaimed, an innocent smile on his face.

“Huh? Who’s Nana?” Kiriyama asked, her brows furrowed dubiously.

“Huh? Aren’t you her big sister? I thought for sure you were,” he replied, looking surprised.

Something wasn’t right.

"Back up a minute, Ao—er, Yoshifumi-kun. Do you remember my full name?"

Come to think of it, they had yet to test the kids on this subject today.

"You're Yaegashi Taichi-san, right?"

"Okay, what about this lady here?" Taichi pointed to Nagase, who was sitting at a desk and devouring her snacks.

"Nagase Iori-san?"

"Okay, and this lady is...?"

"Like I said, she's Nishino Nana's big sister, right? Oh, maybe her cousin or somethin'? I'm just sayin', they look totally alike!"

Evidently Aoki [age 10] had interpreted Kiriyma Yui as a relative of someone by the name of Nishino Nana.

"Uhh... I'm Kiriyma Yui..." Kiriyma replied, smiling awkwardly.

"Kiriyma? So you're not related to the Nishino family, like, at all?"

"No... I've never met anyone with the last name Nishino."

"Oh... Weird... You guys really do look alike. Oh well! So you're Kiriyma Yui-san. Got it!"

"What's going on?" Nagase asked as she jogged over.

"Not sure, but Little Aoki here just mistook Kiriyma for someone else," Taichi explained.

"What? How is that possible?"

"We'll just have to ask him about it when he turns back. No point in harassing an innocent kid," Kiriyma cut in, and with that, the conversation was over.

Outside, dusk had fallen. There was no electricity in the building, but thankfully Nagase's little lamp was battery-powered, ensuring a modicum of light in one corner of their hideout.

"I-N-A-B-A."

At Taichi's command, Inaba [age 4] scribbled on the paper. "I... N... A... B... A."

“H-I-M-E-K-O.”

“H... I... M... E... K... O.”

“Wow! Good job, Himeko-chan! You wrote your name all by yourself!” Taichi patted her on the head, and she beamed back at him.

Naturally, the abandoned building offered nothing of particular interest to a young child, and Inaba [age 4] seemed bored, so Taichi had decided to teach her the alphabet. Thankfully, she showed a strong desire to learn and picked things up quickly—a glimpse of the analytical powerhouse she would eventually grow up to be.

Suddenly, the door flew open with a bang.

“Ha! I beat you here! I win!” Nagase shouted as she ran back into the room, followed by Aoki [age 10]. The two of them had been off exploring the rest of the building.

“Dang it! I can’t believe you’d pull those dirty tricks on a little kid!”

“Oh, please! Don’t be such a sore loser!”

“Grrr... This is why nobody’s ever kissed you!”

“Wha—excuse you! Weren’t you listening?! I have too kissed before! Seventy percent kissed! But it totally counts! ...Okay, that’s it! As of right now, I’ve decided that it counts, and that’s final! That was *officially* my first kiss!”

“Then what does it taste like, huh?”

“Uhhh... Tuna...?”

Is she forgetting that I’m literally right here?!

“Whas wong?” Inaba [age 4] asked innocently. His mood must have been showing on his face.

“Oh, nothing. I guess that stuff is important to you girls, huh?”

“Kissing?”

“D-Don’t say it! You’re still too young to—!”

He realized then that he was speaking to someone who would eventually grow up to kiss him in the future. (Maybe “future” was the wrong word, seeing as it had already happened in the past... Whatever.) Obviously there was no

sexual tension to be had with a four-year-old, but still, it was a weird feeling.

“Duz a kiss make you a gwown-up?”

“No, it’s the other way around. First you grow up, and *then* you kiss.”

“When’s dat?”

“Your first year of high school, autumn at the very latest—I mean, no! It doesn’t matter! No more ‘kiss’ talk! You’re too young!”

“Smooch?”

“Stop! Using a different word doesn’t make it okay!”

“Tongue kiss?”

“*That’s even worse!* Where did you even learn that?!”

“Umm... I sawed it in a German movie.”

“What? Wow, that’s... kinda cool, actually. Especially for a preschooler. Very cultured of you.”

“Sorry to interrupt your weird little conversation, but it’s almost five,” Kiriyama cut in.

“Oh, you’re right... Well, seeing as nobody else has transformed since noon, I guess they’ll probably revert back right at five... probably...” Taichi muttered. At this point, it was almost guaranteed.

“Yeah, probably,” Nagase agreed. “That reminds me, Taichi! What does it look like when they go back to normal? Is it just as sudden as the transformation at noon?”

“Yep, pretty much. They just snap back to their regular selves in a split-second.”

“Huh... Can you see it happen if you pay close attention?”

Just then, Kiriyama leapt to her feet with a look on her face that said they’d overlooked something critical.

“What about their clothes?” she asked in a tiny voice.

But Taichi couldn’t quite hear her. “Sorry, what?”

“When they turn back to normal, *what happens to their clothes?*!”

“Well, the clothes stay the same, so—Oh god.”

Things had worked out the first time around since Nagase

and Kiriyama had simply continued to wear their uniforms, but this time they'd put the kids in more fitting outfits—which meant they'd be far too small for their normal-sized bodies. There was no telling what might happen once they turned back... Either it'd be a really tight fit, or the clothes themselves might tear. (It was hard to say for sure when they didn't know how exactly their bodies transformed.)

“Oh crap! If Inaban transforms back and ends up naked or something, she’s gonna kick our asses!”

“Oh my god, oh my god... Okay, we gotta like, get her changed into something else! Iori, help me! As for Aoki... well, the tracksuit’s stretchy, right?”

“Huh? What’s wrong?” Aoki [age 10] asked, puzzled.

But the two girls paid him no mind as they hurried over to Inaba [age 4]. Unfortunately, the looks on their faces brought back terrible memories of the sheer torture they’d put her through at noon (though the culprits meant no harm by it), and as a result, she ran behind Taichi for safety.

“Taichi! Move! Hurry!”

“I... I’m trying! You gotta let go of me, Himeko-chan!”

“Nnnnn...!” Inaba [age 4] whined as she clung stubbornly to his pant leg.

“What do we do...?”

“Don’t just stand there, Taichi! Just... Argh, we’re out of ti—!”

In a heartbeat, Kiriyama fell into a stunned silence... and Taichi felt the presence behind him grow much larger.

“Nngah! Can’t breathe... Damn clothes too tight...!”

Ahead of him, he could see Aoki had returned to normal and was now adjusting his tracksuit.

Then, finally, Nagase and Kiriyama broke out of their collective trance.

“Aaagggghhhh! Wait, Inabaaaaan! Don’t moooove!”

“Taichi, don’t you dare look! You better not move a muscle, you hear me?!”

Taichi froze stock-still, like a statue. “L-Loud and clear!”

Thankfully, the worst case scenario was safely averted. That said, at one point one of them punched him in the back of the head, which was a rather unsafe and uncool thing to do to someone's occipital bone. Personally, he would have liked them to exercise some self-restraint instead.

Once everyone had calmed down, they held a meeting to explain everything that had happened after Inaba and Aoki Regressed.

"Interesting. Good work securing a hideout for us," said Inaba after a moment. "This is now the second time that the phenomenon has followed the 'rules' lined out for us: it started at noon, and once the affected individuals Regressed, there were no other transformations until five, when the Regressed turned back. I think it's safe to say we can count on this being a hard rule going forward."

Inaba had a point. It had to be more than pure coincidence that both Regressions lasted exactly five hours, precisely from noon to five o'clock, with no other transformations in between.

"...I gotta say, it kinda turns my stomach to have a solid five-hour gap in my memory. Anything could've happened in that time and I wouldn't know about it..."

"I'm afraid you'll just have to trust the rest of us," Taichi replied.

"Yeah. You're right," she nodded.

"So the message on the chalkboard... was a hint from «Heartseed»?" Nagase whispered.

"In which case, I have to wonder why a *certain someone* was left off the list." Inaba shifted her gaze to Taichi, and his chest grew tight.

"Maybe the Regression doesn't affect him, or somethin'?" Aoki offered, and his heart skipped a beat.

"Hmph... Yeah, that's the best guess I can come up with for the time being. I imagine we'll find out sooner or later... So, anything else I should know about?"

"Yeah, actually," Taichi replied, quietly grateful that she'd changed the subject. "At one point, Little Aoki mistook Kiriyama for a different person."

"What? That's weird."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! What's this all about?! Could ya fill a brother in, *por favor*?!" Aoki yelped.

"There's something I'd like to ask you," Kiriyama cut in, her voice quiet, her gaze averted. "Does the name Nishino Nana ring a bell?"

Aoki froze like a statue, his arms still posed in the air mid-flail. "How do you know that name? Where'd ya hear it?"

"From you, actually. [Ten-year-old] Aoki asked me if I was Nishino Nana's big sister."

Aoki sucked in a breath and stared back, speechless.

"So who is she?"

At her question, he stammered for a moment, then resigned himself to his fate and began to talk, a self-deprecating smile on his face.

"She was a girl my age who lived in my neighborhood. I made friends with her around... third or fourth grade, I wanna say... We didn't go to the same school, though. Her parents had her going to some fancy-pants private school... and then when we were in seventh grade, we started dating."

It was a perfectly ordinary anecdote, and yet for some reason Taichi found he really didn't want to hear the rest of it. Somehow it felt... dangerous.

"And...?" Kiriyama prodded, breaking the silence.

"Around the end of the year, her parents decided to move away... so we agreed to go our own ways. Since then, we've sent each other New Year's cards every January, but other than that we haven't talked... and that's about it."

Then she asked:

"I don't suppose this Nishino Nana person looked like me... did she?"

Did Aoki—the guy who claimed to be in love with

Kiriyama—have an ex-girlfriend who resembled her?

And so he answered:

“...She did.”

Yes, Aoki was romantically pursuing a girl who was the spitting image of an old flame.

Kiriyama put a hand to her chest in hesitation. “You say you haven’t seen her in a long time... Do you think she’d still look like me to this day?”

“...Maybe,” Aoki answered.

All of a sudden the room felt very, very cold... like a wintry wind was blowing in from somewhere in the darkness.

“That’s kind of—” Kiriyama began, but Inaba cut her off.

“Alright, let me break this down. So, Yui resembles this ‘Nishino’ girl Aoki knew when he was younger. Then, courtesy of a supernatural phenomenon, Aoki turns back into a kid. His kid brain somehow recognizes and accepts everyone around him, but because Yui in particular happens to resemble this Nishino person, his newly [ten-year-old] brain pulls from his childhood memories and mistakenly registers her as Nishino’s older sister. That’s pretty much all there is to it, yeah? Sounds like some wires got crossed. Happens to everybody,” she mused, all without pausing to give anyone room to interject.

“Yeah, seems pretty harmless to me,” Nagase agreed. “With all these bizarre transformations, stuff’s bound to get mixed up somewhere.”

With that, the conversation was ended.

And so they headed home, with the agreement to meet up at the same place the next day. According to their tentative theory about the rules of the phenomenon, they were supposed to be safe until noon tomorrow. Of course, Taichi in particular was rather confident in this theory, given that he possessed something the others did not: direct confirmation.

One by one, they each went their own separate ways...

until only Taichi and Aoki remained. Together they sat side by side on the train, swaying with its motions. Normally Aoki was the type to blather on about some nonsense or another, but today he was rather quiet, staring straight ahead through the window across the way.

Taichi wasn't sure whether he ought to bring it up, but ultimately decided he would only regret it later if he chose to stay quiet. After all, he'd learned that sometimes the only option was simply to take the plunge.

Maybe Aoki didn't want to talk about it, but he was going to open up the floor regardless.

"You know... you weren't really acting like yourself back there."

There was a pause, and then Aoki seemed to snap back to reality. "Huh? I wasn't?"

"Well, I mean... it's just not like you to clam up like that."

"...Oh, the whole 'Yui looks like my ex' thing? C'mon, cut me some slack. Of course I was gonna get all awkward about it. She made it sound like I..." He trailed off.

"Yeah, but I expected you to follow it up with 'Bottom line, I'm in love with you, not her!' or something, that's all."

For a while, Aoki didn't respond. Then, eventually, he sighed and muttered in a low voice, "Ever since I turned back, my head's been a total mess, dude. My feelings, my memories, everything." He paused. "I dunno... Any other day and I probably woulda said something like that, but I'm just so mixed up right now..."

"Too mixed up to know if you love Kiriyama?"

"Well, I mean... Right now, I remember how hard I fell for Nana. I can't pretend those feelings were never there."

Evidently it was something he had long since forgotten... until the Regression dug it back out of him.

"From the moment I laid eyes on Yui, I always thought she looked a lot like Nana. Y'know, obviously. But it was just a passing thought."

The train slowed to a stop as it rolled into the next

station. The doors opened. A few people stepped off, a few people stepped on. Then the doors shut, and the train started moving again.

“I’m in love with Yui... but at one point, I was in love with Nana. Crazy about her. For a long time. Right now I’d say I love Yui more, but it just makes me think... when did I ever stop loving Nana?” Aoki put a hand to his forehead. “I don’t remember when it stopped... We didn’t break up until after she moved away... When did I move on? Is my love for Nana just... *gone*? Or is it still knockin’ around in there?” He looked at Taichi—a lost lamb seeking his shepherd. “Hey, Taichi? What does it really mean to love someone, anyways?”

Something told him he had no right to answer that question.

Another unnatural phenomenon had taken over the CRC, which meant something was bound to change—and for better or for worse, that change would be permanent.

There would be no going back.

Ever.

+ + +

Kiryama Yui crept into her parents’ bedroom.

She hadn’t been in here in quite some time. Against the far wall sat a glass display case, home to all her former glory—trophies, plaques, medals, award certificates—all of them won over the course of her karate days.

She slid the cabinet door open, took out a small gold medal, and gently ran her finger over it. It was the medal she’d won in her first-ever karate competition—an otherwise small, forgettable event.

Her parents wanted her to be strong, both physically and emotionally, and so she had started taking karate lessons at their request. In the beginning they didn’t push her too hard, but as she began to show incredible talent, they too

began to take it much more seriously.

As for Yui herself, she had a blast doing karate. It wasn't her sole focus, but looking back, at age eleven it was undeniably a huge part of her life.

But then one day it all came crashing down. One close shave with sexual assault instilled in her a deep fear of men, and she was forced to give up her dreams.

But she didn't feel bitter towards her attacker. She had simply resigned herself to the fact that it was all beyond her control. In a world full of so much misery—car accidents, crippling illnesses—misfortune was bound to strike her eventually. If anything, she told herself she should be grateful it wasn't something worse. There was no use crying over spilled milk.

Besides, there was still so much good in the world... and with a little help from her awesome friends, she was now slowly but surely moving past it. So what more could she ask for? Wasn't that just the way life went, really? Sometimes things were good, sometimes things were bad. Peaks and valleys, like a roller coaster.

Some things were simply outside one's control, no matter what. «Heartseed»'s phenomena had taught her that the hard way. She couldn't make miracles happen; she could only keep doing her best—

“Sis?”

The sudden voice nearly made Yui jump out of her skin. Hastily, she returned the medal to the cabinet, then spun around. There she found Anzu, her younger sister by two years, standing by the bedroom door.

“Wh-What's up?”

“What's up with *you*? You haven't wanted to look at that old karate stuff ever since you quit.”

“Oh, uh, it's nothing. I was just... randomly feeling nostalgic, that's all.”

Anzu didn't question this. “Okay then. Oh yeah, I meant to tell you! I ran into Mihashi-san earlier today. Remember

her? She was kinda like your ‘rival’ in all those competitions, right?”

Mihashi Chinatsu. Yui hadn’t expected to hear that name for a second time today.

“You might not have liked her very much, but I used to talk to her all the time. So anyway, she said she’s back in town for winter break.”

Why did she have to come back during one of these stupid phenomena? Was this just another low point in Yui’s life? Yes, of course! It had to be. This was just... something temporary that she needed to endure.

“Interesting...” Now she’d inadvertently missed her chance to mention their previous encounter.

“Not to gossip or anything, but I guess Mihashi-san’s parents are getting divorced, and it’s kinda complicated. So anyways...”

Anzu’s voice drifted in one ear and out the other. She knew her sister meant nothing by it; she was just discussing the day’s events, after all. But Yui couldn’t help but wonder —why should she care about the latest happenings in the life of someone she only vaguely knew through a martial art she had long since quit? What good would come of reviving those old memories?

It was all in the past, and she couldn’t go back. She was different now. None of it mattered anymore. This information was useless to her.

...But in that case, there was no point in her trying to dig up the history of the guy who claimed to be in love with her.

Stricken with the Regression phenomenon, Aoki Yoshifumi had mistaken Yui for someone from his past—someone who, according to him, physically resembled her. And Aoki had previously been in love with that person. Dated that person.

In the past, Aoki had claimed he’d fallen for Yui the moment he laid eyes on her. Purely a gut reaction with no rationale behind it. Love at first sight.

But if it was love at first sight... and she happened to look

like some old flame... didn't that suggest he only fell for her because of their resemblance?

And if they only broke up because she was forced to move away... didn't that suggest Yui herself was merely a replacement goldfish?

She didn't know if it was true. Maybe she was just getting paranoid. Either way, it turned her stomach.

At the same time, however, she didn't have the courage to find out for sure. *God, I'm so laughably pathetic.* She'd always rejected his feelings, but now she was afraid those feelings weren't real? And she was mad at him about it?

"Uh, sis? You listening?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. Yeah, I'm listening."

"So I was thinking... maybe you should try getting back into karate? Only if you want to, obviously. You still haven't told me why you quit in the first place... I just miss my kickass karate sister, you know?"

Why are we still talking about karate? That was then. This is now. There's no going back.

She felt a dull ache in her chest. Where did that come from? She wasn't sure.

All I know is, I can't look back.

She wanted to forget it. All of it. Everything about Aoki, too.

She hated it. It hurt so bad.

She just wanted the pain to stop.

"What's wrong, sis? Why are you crying? Was it something I said? I'm sorry... Please don't cry..."

Trust me, I wish I knew.

Chapter 3: Old Self, New Self

The next day, Taichi deboarded at the train station closest to Inaba's house. Once again, he was ridiculously early.

"T-Taichi?! I can scarcely believe it! Fate hath brought us together again!" There was Nagase Iori, being overly dramatic as usual. He noticed she wasn't wearing her beanie today.

"Somehow I don't think it counts as 'fate' when we literally made plans to meet up today."

"Oh, right! Come to think of it, we saw each other yesterday, too! Heck yeah!" she exclaimed with a bit more enthusiasm than Taichi would have attributed to the situation. "But anyway, I dunno... It's still funny timing that we managed to cross paths at this exact moment... Maybe there's some kind of magnetic attraction..."

"Magnetic attraction? What do you mean?"

"Oh, uh, nothing. Don't worry about it. Just talking to myself." For the briefest of moments, she looked... conflicted.

"You know you can always talk to me, right?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine! I promise, if I need your help with something, I'll say so!" She leveled him with a dismal stare. "And you know that door swings both ways, right?"

"Yeah, of course..."

"Hey! Look me in the eye when you say that, mister!"

"Oh, sorry. It's just kinda embarrassing... Anyway, you're certainly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning..."

Indeed, despite the present threat of the Age Regression, her energy levels seemed to be at an all-time high.

"You know, Taichi, when you tell yourself you're the only one who can solve something, that's your narcissism

talking!"

"Lose the grin, would you? I'm trying to have a serious conversation here!"

Truth be told, he was still a bit insecure about the whole "narcissist" thing. That said, he appreciated her blunt honesty.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me. You aren't hiding anything from the rest of us, are you, Taichi?"

His heart nearly stopped.

"O-Of course not! I'm an open book!" He paused. "What makes you think I would be hiding something?"

He couldn't tell her about «The Second». It had threatened him into silence, and since he could never be sure when it might be watching, he had no choice but to obey.

"Mmm... I feel it in my gut!"

Nagase's sharp intuition was proving to be a formidable foe indeed.

They walked side by side, headed to the derelict building that currently served as their hideout.

"I guess these Regression shenanigans affect everyone but you, huh?" Nagase mused out of nowhere.

"I don't know, m-maybe? So far it seems to follow the 'rules' we found on the chalkboard, so..."

He didn't know how much he could get away with saying. What exactly would «The Second» consider off-limits? Were there degrees of "safe" versus "unsafe" statements he could make?

"Hmmm... I guess we'll need you to look after us, then... I feel bad pushing all the work on you, though... Crap, I'm being a downer again!"

"It's fine! Like I said, feel free to vent to me anytime."

"Gah! I knew it was all gonna lead back to that! I totally walked right into it!"

"So? I told you, it's fine."

"But you've already done so much for me... Rrgh! You

gotta let me return the favor somehow! I know I'm not as smart or competent as Inaban, but—”

“*That's not true!*”

Nagase blinked back in surprise. Maybe he'd reacted a little too strongly.

“...You help me way more than you realize, Nagase. Your energy, your smile... It gives me the strength to push forward, you know?”

“Wait, what? You make me sound all happy-go-lucky and stuff.”

“I mean, obviously you're not that two-dimensional, but I'd say you have your moments. Like right now, for example. You've been acting pretty darn happy-go-lucky for *at least* the past ten minutes.”

“Mmm... I dunno...” Nagase smiled shyly. “Okay, fine! Guess I'll go ahead and ask, then!”

“What's up?”

“The next time I turn into a kid... could I ask you to sorta... take note of what I'm like? Not like a full-scale observation or anything. Just, y'know, casually.” The words left her lips in a white fog, her tone icy.

When asked to describe oneself, it was hardly uncommon to have trouble answering—but for most people, that lack of answer didn't stop them from living their lives. In Nagase's case, however, it weighed on her. Now that she knew she didn't have an answer, she couldn't rest until she found one... and so she kept searching and searching. It was a task made even harder by the fact that she'd spent so much of her life pretending to be someone else.

“Oh, uh, don't get the wrong idea, though! I know my ‘true self’ is something I'll figure out with time. I'm not super hung up on it or anything,” she continued in a more cheerful voice. “It's just... This is a chance for us to rediscover our old selves, y'know?”

Normally the past would stay in the past—but under the Age Regression phenomenon, the impossible was now

possible.

"I know I can't go back, and I know I can't redo any of it... but I still can't help but think about it." She shook her fist at the sky. "Grrr! Curse you, «Heartseed»! Y'know, I almost wonder if he's doing this on purpose. Probably not, but still... Is my existential crisis entertaining for you?! Huh?! Is that why you keep messing with me?!"

The entities' motives were unclear, and there was no end in sight.

"Oh well... No sense whining about «Heartseed» when we know it won't solve anything."

The conversation petered out as they came to a stop at the street corner. While they waited for the crosswalk signal to change, Taichi gazed absently at the passing cars... Then he realized Nagase was staring at something up ahead.

He followed her gaze to find a man standing on the opposite street corner, happily holding hands with what appeared to be his six- or seven-year-old daughter. Did it remind Nagase of all the stepfathers she'd had over the years? He could scarcely imagine how she must've felt.

"Alright, now you've done it! I have a question for you!" Nagase pointed her finger in his face.

"What did I do...?" Taichi muttered, unsure how to respond.

"Hypothetical question: *If you had the chance to change your fate, would you?*" she asked in her best thespian voice.

What kind of answer did she want from him? He decided to play it safe.

"What, like, redo my life and start over? I mean, admittedly, there have been quite a few times that I've wished there was an undo button in real life, but... that's just not how life works."

"*Normally*, yeah." The implication being, of course, that their lives were anything but normal now. "Personally, I think I'd go for it, if I had the chance. Maybe everything would work out the second time around."

That day, when noon struck, it was Nagase and Aoki who Regressed—Nagase to [age 14] and Aoki to [age 11].

“I think this confirms our theory. So far it’s always affected precisely two of us at a time, so that might be another rule, but it’s too early to tell...” Inaba glanced over at Nagase [age 14]. “Fourteen, huh... This phenomenon’s got quite a range.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Taichi asked.

Naturally, compared to [age 6], Nagase [age 14] didn’t look that much different from her normal self, other than a slightly younger-looking face. Thankfully, she didn’t need to change clothes.

“I’m just saying, it’ll be hard to predict. One day we might Regress to ten minutes ago, and the next we might Regress to ten minutes after we’re born.”

“Wait, so... somebody might Regress into a newborn?”

Inaba’s smile stiffened. “Maybe we should invest in some diapers.”

And so the five of them spent yet another day in the same abandoned building as yesterday. The weather forecast said it would get cold that night, so the five of them pooled their money to buy a cheap kerosene heater. Fittingly for its price point, it wasn’t a very powerful machine, but when supplemented with blankets and hand warmers, it would suffice to stave off the cold and prevent hypothermia.

That day’s Regression was a bit more peaceful than the others had been, possibly because the kids in question were towards the older side of the scale. Around three o’clock, everyone was starting to get a little thirsty.

“In that case, I’ll go for a walk and pick something up while I’m out... Actually, why don’t we all go?” Inaba suggested as she popped the collar on her coat.

“All of us? You sure we can take Nagase and Aoki outside while they’re Regressed?”

"Well, I think it's safe to say there won't be any more transformations until five, so all we have to do is be back by then. And if we encounter anyone they know, we can just make up an excuse. Tell 'em they're distant relatives who came to visit over winter break. Easy."

Maybe it really was that simple.

"It'd be one thing if we tried to take them to karaoke or something, but no one can interrogate us if we're just walking down the street minding our own business... Bottom line, I refuse to spend my winter holidays cooped up in some run-down building! At least let us hide out somewhere warm, damn it!"

"Spoken like a true homebody."

"I'd like to go, too!" Nagase [age 14] exclaimed, raising her hand. She seemed to be a cheerful, well-mannered girl—as though someone had taken the normal Nagase and pruned away all of her zany quirks.

"What about you two?" Inaba asked Kiriyama and Aoki [age 11], the latter of whom was engrossed in a mobile game. "Uh, hello? Yoshifumi? You coming with us?"

"Huh? Oh... Meh, I'll pass. I'm in the middle of a game right now."

"Tch... Kids these days never wanna go out and do anything..."

"Are you forgetting what you literally just said a minute ago...?"

Was she inviting these snarky retorts on purpose, or what?

"I guess I'll stay, too. We can't leave him here by himself, after all," said Kiriyama, gazing at him fondly, as if he were her younger brother.

"Aw, it's fine! You can go without me, Nishino-san!"

Instantly, Kiriyama froze. Silence fell over the room.

This was the second time Aoki had mistaken Kiriyama Yui for a relative of Nishino Nana during a Regression.

And Nagase [age 14] was the first person to break the

silence.

“Wait, what? Yoshifumi-kun, I think you might have Kiriyama Yui-san mixed up with someone else.”

“Huh? Whaddya mean?”

“Okay, this is a dumb question, but... You’re Kiriyama Yui-san, right?”

“Oh, um... Yeah, that’s me...”

“What, really?” Aoki [age 11] scrutinized Kiriyama’s face for a moment. “Huh... I guess you just look a lot like her... Weird. Okay then, I guess you’re Kiriyama-san. Got it.” With that, he went back to his game. Evidently he wasn’t too hung up on it.

“Hey, uh, Yui? Maybe don’t—”

“I won’t. I’m fine,” Kiriyama cut in. Her smile felt a bit... forced.

“Just don’t overthink it,” Inaba pressed. “And if anything happens, give me a call.”

“What if I stay so Kiriyama-san can go in my place?”

“That’s really thoughtful of you, um... Iori-chan... but don’t worry about me. I’ll be here when you get back.”

And so Taichi followed the others out of the building, all the while feeling a touch uneasy at the prospect of leaving Kiriyama and Aoki [age 11] alone together.

“Uggghhh... It’s so cooold!” Nagase [age 14] grumbled, burying her face in her scarf as she rubbed her hands together for warmth.

“Wanna borrow my gloves?” Taichi offered.

She shook her head. “No, no, I’m fine. Thank you, though.”

“C’mon, no need to hold back on my account. Take them.”

He pressed the gloves into her hands. If she got sick during the Regression, would it carry over back to her original self once she transformed back? He wasn’t sure... but either way, he didn’t want to risk it.

“Oh... Okay... Thank you, Taichi-san.” Nagase [age 14]

giggled. "They're so warm."

She smiled softly—an infectious, heartwarming sort of smile—and for once, he was glad to be a martyr.

"You sure look happy," Inaba commented dryly.

"I should make it up to you somehow... Oh, I know!"

Suddenly, Nagase [age 14] hugged his arm. "I wuv you, big brother!"

"B-Big brother?!"

What happened to "Taichi-san"?!?

"What's wrong? I thought you liked being called that."

"I mean, I do, but... how did you know that?!"

Crap, I probably shouldn't have copped to that...

"Mmm... Female intuition, I guess?" Nagase [age 14] grinned. Until now, she'd struck him as a thoughtful, considerate girl, but now he was starting to understand exactly what it meant to change oneself to suit other people's preferences... and it was terrifying.

She's dangerous, this one...

And then something else attached itself rather aggressively to his other arm.

"Having fun canoodling with a younger woman, *big brother?*"

"*Ow ow ow owl!* I-Inaba, you're gonna rip my ear off! I'm sorry, okay?!"

"You're a lucky boy, Taichi-san. Now you have a lovely lady on each arm."

"Iori, I swear to fucking god, if you weren't [fourteen] right now, I would kick your ass!" Inaba roared.

"I don't know about 'lovely lady'... More like 'ferocious she-devil'... OUCH!"

"Keep your uncomfortably accurate retorts to yourself!"

"Hahaha! You guys make quite the pair! You're like an old married couple!"

"M-Me and him? An old married couple?"

"Yup! You two seem super compatible!"

"I... I see... You're a nice girl, Iori-chan. I'll buy you

something nice while we're out. My treat."

"Great... Now she's got her hooks in you, too..."

Nagase Iori [age 14] was not to be underestimated.

And so, at their Regressed companion's insistence, the three of them headed to the lounge area in the corner of the hardware store to enjoy some coffee.

After Taichi and Inaba had purchased their drinks from the vending machine, they attempted to buy one for Nagase [age 14], but she simply shook her head.

"Iori-chan?"

"Sorry, Taichi-san! I wanna go check something out real quick. I'll be right back!" With that, she jogged off.

"What the—HEY! Great, now what?! Shouldn't we go after her?!"

But Inaba remained calm in the face of Taichi's panic.

"Mmm... I'm sure it's fine. I doubt she'll get up to any trouble. And if anyone recognizes her, they'll probably write her off as a lookalike."

"But..."

Surely they were better off reducing the risk of complications as much as possible.

"Believe it or not, these things often have a way of working themselves out." She blew on her steaming coffee.

"You know, Inaba... Sometimes you worry way too much, and other times it's like you don't care at all..."

"Quite the seductive contrast, wouldn't you say?"

"Uh... I don't know about *seductive*, but okay..."

Silence fell between them.

Whenever he found himself sharing a peaceful moment alone with Inaba, he couldn't help but feel a bit restless. She was a treasured friend—someone who had at one point confessed her love for him, but he'd turned her down, explaining that he had feelings for someone else. Despite this, she'd declared that she wouldn't back down... and he'd been dawdling ever since...

Then Inaba broke the silence.

“She set us up, didn’t she?”

“Huh?”

“She’s too damn smart for her own good.”

Inaba sipped her coffee, and Taichi followed suit. A blend of sweetness and bitterness danced on his tongue.

“...She left us alone together on purpose?”

“That’s my theory, anyway... though I can’t imagine what sort of sentiment led her to do such a thing in the first place.”

“Is this what she was talking about when she told us about all her past efforts to ‘be the person everyone wants her to be’?”

“No clue. That said, admittedly I do see her as a smart, sensible girl...”

Who was Nagase [age 14], really? Was she a sweet, innocent girl who simply cared about making others happy? Was she putting on an act in order to curry favor with everyone around her? Or... was she a nuanced mixture of all these things, like you might expect from any normal person?

“Oh well. Either way, it’s all in the past, right?” Inaba continued, gazing firmly into his eyes.

“...Right. And what matters now is the present.”

“Right,” she whispered, then looked away. “Off-topic, but... Could you tell me a bit more about what was I like when I Regressed to [age four]?”

“You were a good girl who did as you were told. And you were pretty smart, too.”

Let’s go ahead and not mention the “kissing” conversation...

“Stop with the compliments before you make me blush... Was I shy at all?”

“Hmm... You were a little afraid of Nagase and Kiriyama, but I think it was justified...”

“Afraid of them? I see... Yeah, I was always afraid of something or other. Still am, honestly.” Inaba’s gaze grew

distant. “I’m glad you’ve only seen my early childhood, because I only get worse from there. In middle school I started learning a bunch of bizarre trivia... It was pretty cringey.”

“Aww, c’mon. That doesn’t sound so cringey to me.”

“The fact of the matter is, I’d prefer no one see my past selves... especially not you. And I can’t pretend I don’t feel that way.”

“It’s not like seeing them will change anything. It’s all in the past—you just said so yourself.”

“And I’m doing my best to believe that... but something *will* change. It’d be one thing if we were all recounting our memories to each other, but having those memories perfectly replicated right in front of you? That’s a whole different beast. And it’s one that can do damage. I mean, Yui and Aoki are already...” Inaba trailed off.

Their old selves weren’t really *them*... but at the same time, they were.

“Everyone has things they want to keep private... things they don’t want to know about others... things they regret knowing... things they’re better off not remembering.”

Here in the present, the past wasn’t meant to exist... but what if it did anyway?

“And any one of those things has the potential to trigger a permanent change.”

“But... we’ve survived these things so far, haven’t we? What’s to say this one will be any different?” Taichi ventured, hoping to find a shred of hope in the darkness.

“Yes, somehow everything’s worked out fine thus far. It’s a miracle, really. But there’s no guarantee our luck won’t run out. We’re on thin ice, Taichi.”

And eventually that ice would break... but when? Would it hold out until these freakish phenomena finally ended? Or would the phenomena continue right up until it broke them?

“I can’t remember much of my thought process at age four... possibly because I didn’t really *have* a thought

process at that age..." Inaba paused to bite her fingernail. "But ever since the Regression ended yesterday, I can remember the vaguest traces of how I felt at the time... Emotions so pure and undiluted, it's honestly overwhelming."

She clutched at her chest, and Taichi could only imagine how complicated this phenomenon must have been for her and everyone else. After all, he hadn't experienced it himself.

"At first, when I realized the phenomenon was physical this time around, I had a feeling it was going to be hell—forced to hide from everyone we know, practically living our lives on the run. But then we figured out the rules, and I thought, *you know, maybe this won't be so bad*. But I was wrong. It's fucking hell." She scoffed at herself. "Anyway, why am I rambling? God, I'm annoying. I'll just cut to the point." She turned her gaze on him, her eyes brimming with emotion. "I'm scared, Taichi. Really, really scared."



Inaba was opening up to him, showing him her vulnerable side without shying away from it. But Taichi knew he couldn't solve her worries. Platitudes were all he could offer her.

"It'll be okay..."

But his voice lacked conviction—and he had a feeling he knew why.

"Yeah, I'm choosing to believe that," Inaba replied, forcing a smile. "I just wish «Heartseed» would show up and talk to us already, damn it."

"Nngh..." he groaned under his breath, but thankfully she didn't seem to notice.

"It's weird... I told myself I never wanted to see him again, but once a new phenomenon rolls around, I'd rather he just come find us so we can get a proper explanation..."

Unfortunately, «Heartseed» wasn't the one in charge of the phenomenon this time around—and Taichi was most likely the only one who knew. Judging from Inaba's comment just now, «The Second» hadn't revealed itself to anyone else. This meant the safety of the group depended entirely on how well he could maintain the charade.

He couldn't go to anyone else for advice.

And their fates were in his hands.

At five o'clock, Nagase [age 14] and Aoki [age 11] turned back. Immediately afterwards, Nagase began to groan, clutching her head.

"Are you okay?!" Taichi asked, half-panicked.

"I'm fine... Just a little confused, that's all..." she replied, though in his opinion, she looked a little too pale to be "fine."

"Are we really gonna have to suffer through this shit every single day?" Inaba murmured as the five of them packed up to head home. Since the building was proving to be a reliably safe hideout, they decided to store some of their stuff there for the next day.

"If anything, I'd say this is easy mode compared to the others!" Aoki remarked. "At least this way we know when it'll happen, so we can plan around it!"

"Yeah, true!" Nagase chimed in. "Plus, it's winter break, so we don't have to worry about going to school. But it kinda sucks not being able to go home for most of the day!" Thankfully, her energy levels already seemed to be back to normal.

"But it's almost New Year's... How do we explain this to our parents? They're going to expect us to be around to celebrate the holidays with them..." Kiriyama muttered sadly.

"Oh, that's right! I forgot!" Nagase replied. "Most people spend New Year's with their grandparents, right? That's not really a thing with my family... What about you guys?"

"My parents don't have any plans to travel this year," said Taichi.

"My grandma lives pretty close, so it's no big deal."

"Yeah, same."

"Eh, my family won't mind if I skip out this year."

Fortunately, it sounded like there would be no major complications.

"Man, we're lucky no one has to travel for the holidays. We may not be able to be with our families during the daytime, but at least our nights are free. Alternatively, anyone who doesn't Regress can just go back home for the day. We can figure something out."

"But we should try to stay together as much as possible! We gotta be there for each other, y'know?" Aoki declared.

Inaba snickered. "Good point... Alright, let's look on the bright side: at least this way we can spend our whole winter break together! And we don't have to stay cooped up inside. As long as we're careful, we can go wherever we need to."

"Like a Shinto shrine! We should all celebrate *hatsumoude* together!" Nagase added brightly. "What are some other classic New Year's traditions... Oh, I know! We

gotta eat some mochi! Oh, but first we should have some soba noodles on New Year's Eve! Wait... but if I Regress that day, then I won't remember anything that happened from noon to five... which is kinda the same as not eating any in the first place! Oh my god! That would destroy me!"

"Is *food* seriously the worst of your concerns right now...?" Taichi retorted under his breath.

That's kind of impressive, actually.

"Besides, when you think about it, it's actually a lot of fun to see our friends turn into little kids! Gosh, I'd kill to see mini-Inaban one more time!"

At this point, Nagase seemed almost *too* enthusiastic about it.

Following along, Kiriyma perked up. "Oh my gosh, I wanna play with wittle bitty Inaba too! She's just so sweet and cute! Next time I see her..." She began to giggle suggestively; naturally, Inaba found this rather alarming. After all, Kiriyma Yui had a particular... *fondness* for cute things.

"What's so funny?! What are you planning to do to me, Yui?!"

"Oh, but I wouldn't mind playing with mini-Iori, either..."

"Uh, Yui?! Why is your laughter getting all throaty and weird?! Please don't handle me the way I handled mini-Inaban!"

"What the *fuck* did you people do to me?!"

"Psst! Taichi! Just wondering, but... they didn't do anything weird to me, did they...?" Aoki asked, looking more than a little concerned, and Taichi was more than happy to assuage those fears.

"Nope."

"Whew, that's a relief... Actually, no! I feel a little left out! Pretty sure kid me is just as cute as they are!"

Give me a break...

In that moment, the dim light of the lantern lamp felt just a bit brighter. Together, the CRC had rejected the

encroaching darkness... and Taichi was sincerely impressed. Alone they were powerless, but together they could pull through and survive this Age Regression—all with smiles on their faces.

The only thing that worried him now was the fact that Kiriyama and Aoki hadn't acknowledged each other's presence.

+ + +

And so it was that Kiriyama Anzu, the younger daughter of the Kiriyama household, received a phone call from a certain someone with whom she had only recently reunited—her older sister's karate rival, Mihashi Chinatsu.

"You wouldn't happen to know why she dropped out of karate, would you?" Mihashi asked, and it was obvious from her tone that she didn't approve of the decision.

"No, unfortunately. She's refused to tell me."

"And now she's joined some weird club?"

"It's called the Cultural Research Club. Apparently they're busy with something lately, so she's been gone, like, a lot the past few days."

"They're taking her away from her family during the holidays, and yet you don't know what it is they supposedly need her for?"

"Does it really matter? After she quit karate, she was just... an empty shell... But ever since she joined the club, it's like she's finally found something that makes her happy again. She always gushes to me about how much fun she has when she's with them... so I think it's a good thing she joined."

It was the honest truth.

"...I see."

"Come to think of it, she said she'll be busy with club stuff for New Year's, too. Dad wasn't too happy about her choosing her friends over her family for the holidays. They

were bickering about it earlier.”

“She likes it *that much?*”

Even Anzu couldn’t imagine what might be more important than spending time together as a family. Generally speaking, Yui was much, much happier these days, but she still seemed a little unstable—sometimes she would isolate herself in her room, and other times she would act like an entirely different person. And Anzu could tell it had something to do with her club.

“I’d like to try to talk to her again, but first I think I need to find out what exactly she’s up to these days... Where does she have these club meetups?”

“I don’t know, but school’s closed during winter break, so it can’t be there... And lately she’s been searching the house for kid-size clothes and old blankets to take with her. It’s really weird...”

Indeed, upon further contemplation, Yui was acting downright bizarre... Worryingly so.

“Okay, now I *definitely* need to find out... even if it means I have to tail her.”

“What? You mean, like, follow her and see where she goes?”

“I mean, obviously I’m not trying to stalk her or anything
—”

“C-Can I come, too?!”

Chapter 4: No Choice

At last, the worst case scenario had finally come to pass.

He'd always known the risk was there, but he'd convinced himself the chances were nil.

That day, the Regression had struck two individuals: Nagase Iori and Aoki Yoshifumi.

Aoki had Regressed to [age 12], which was all well and good.

The problem was Nagase.

“Dah!”

“Don’t give me that! Hey! Hold still so I can get you dressed!” Kiriyama Yui shouted as she wrestled with the baby in her arms.

Yes, Nagase Iori had Regressed into an infant.

“Earth to Taichi! Wake up!” Inaba Himeko snapped as she smacked him lightly on the cheek, returning him to reality.

“R-Right! Sorry... You’re right. I need to wake up and face reality.”

“Trust me, I understand how you feel,” she replied wearily.

“O-Okay, what do you need me to do? Can we figure something out using the clothes we’ve got here?” Taichi asked.

“I think we’re going to need like real, actual baby clothes! She won’t frickin’ hold still!” Kiriyama shouted back.

“Gotcha... I’ll go buy a onesie or something. What about diapers? And we’re going to need to feed her at some point, right?” As he spoke, Taichi’s gaze settled on a certain section of Inaba’s body. He quickly caught himself, but not before Inaba’s cheeks flushed pink.

“E-Excuse you! I’ll have you know, a pure maiden such as myself would be utterly incapable of breastfeeding!”

“Gah! Don’t kick me! It was just the first thing I thought of, that’s all!”

“Huh? Breastfeeding?”

Then she rounded on Aoki [age 12] and slapped him for good measure. “Yoshifumi! Don’t get your jimmies rustled, you pervy little monkey!”

“OUCH!”

Personally, Taichi felt his punishment was a little extreme, considering the term was clinical at worst.

“Anyway, relax! Seeing as she looks to be about one or so... I’d say she can probably eat just about anything as long as we mash it up for her! Got it?!”

“O-Okay! No breastfeeding required! Got it!”

“Good grief,” she sighed. “That said... In your case, I’d consider it, at least.”

“Ghhccck?!” Taichi choked loudly.

“I’m kidding, obviously.”

“Wh-Wh-Why would you joke about that?!”

You made me picture it and everything!

“I mean, if you’re serious about it, we can make it happen,” she teased seductively, pulling the neckline of her shirt down to expose a few inches of bare skin.

A loud *CRASH* put an end to that, as Kiriyama sent one of the office chairs flying, her face red with rage. “QUIT YOUR FLIRTING AND GO BUY STUFF FOR THE BABY! NOW!”

“Wah... Waaaaaaaahhhh!”

Evidently all the shouting had frightened Nagase [age 1(?)], as she began to cry.

“Oh no! I’m sorry, Iori-chan! Please don’t cry! I’ll stop yelling now, I promise! Shhh... Shhh... It’s okay...”

“It’s okie-dokie-Aoki!”

“Yoshifumi! Keep your stupid jokes to yourself! You’re acting like a child!” Inaba snapped.

“He *is* a child,” Taichi retorted. (It *was* a pretty dumb joke, though.)

All things considered, he could tell today was shaping up

to be one hell of a day.

And so Taichi and Inaba dashed off to buy all the necessary baby gear. When they returned, they dressed Nagase [age 1] in a diaper and onesie, then fed her some baby food for good measure. Crisis averted—for now, anyway.

“You’re supposed to keep babies warm at all times, right?” Kiriymama pondered as she sat with Nagase [age 1] on a blanket on the floor. She’d seemed a little out of spirits as of late, but today she appeared to be back to her usual self while looking after the baby.

“Maybe so, but don’t put her too close to the heater. Position yourself in between so you can keep her safe,” Inaba instructed.

Nagase [age 1] was something of a speedy crawler, so she required constant supervision to prevent her from hurting herself on the kerosene heater. As for Aoki [age 12], he was sitting in an office chair, playing a mobile game. Past experience showed that he typically behaved himself as long as he had a source of entertainment, so the others generally felt comfortable leaving him to his own devices.

Just then, Nagase [age 1] began to whimper.

“What’s wrong, sweetie? It’s okay... That’s my good girl...” Kiriymama pulled her into her arms to reassure her, but the baby continued to fuss. “What’s the matter with her? We only just fed her... Maybe she’s sleepy...?” she muttered.

“Either that, or she needs her diaper changed,” Inaba mused quietly.

Dirty diapers—an inescapable facet of raising an infant. Ethically speaking, there was nothing wrong with a guy changing a little girl’s diaper, or vice versa... except for the fact that this particular little girl was also technically Nagase Iori, his classmate, clubmate, and crush.

Inaba sniffed the air. “Come to think of it... It does smell a little ripe in here...”

“Blegh! Smells like poopy!”

“Damn it, Yoshifumi, don’t say *poopy!* I’m trying to be discreet here!”

“And now he’s got *you* saying it,” Taichi retorted.
(Granted, she was allowed to say it if she wanted to.)

“Huh? Oh, I’m sorry! My nose is stuffy, so I couldn’t really tell,” said Kiriyama as she lay Nagase [age 1] down on the blanket. Her brows furrowed. “Okay, so... uh... what do I do? Help me out here, Inaba!”

“What? It’s easy. You just unbutton the crotch of the onesie, yank off the old diaper, wipe her up, and then you put a new one on her... right?”

“You make it sound so easy! This is my first time... Plus, she wiggles all over the place... You gotta help me!”

“No way. That’s nasty.”

Apparently she was fine with foisting all the dirty jobs on someone else.

“Come on, don’t be like that! Someone’s gotta do this, you know! Ugh, fine... Taichi, could you please help me?”

“Uh... I mean, I don’t mind, but... would Nagase be okay with that, you think...?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t do this by myself!”

“Right... Okay, I’ll help you.” Taichi headed over to the blanket area. After all, it was just one measly diaper, right? “Okay, so, how are we doing this? Should I take her clothes off, and then you—AAAGGGHHH?!?”

Someone grabbed his neck from behind and twisted it until he thought it might snap.

“Move, Taichi! I’ll do it myself! Regressed or not, no girl in her right mind would want some guy from school looking at her asshole!”

“Okay, but you really need to learn how to use your words!” Taichi wailed.

Later, Taichi and Inaba were sitting off to the side, watching as Kiriyama gave Nagase [age 1] some apple juice

in a sippy cup.

"By the way, Taichi," Inaba spoke up suddenly, "I think at this point it's safe to say the Regression won't affect you, eh?"

"Yeah, uh... Apparently not," he replied, willing his voice to stay level.

"Something about it doesn't feel right, though," she continued quietly. "It's weird that it only affects four of us... and weirder still that goddamn «Heartseed» is nowhere to be seen." She bit her fingernail in contemplation. "Do you think... maybe there's some other entity in charge this time around? Someone who's not «Heartseed»?"

Where could she have gotten that idea? He felt his pulse begin to race. What could he say to that? He knew he needed to keep his promise to «The Second», but at the same time, if he confessed everything to Inaba, maybe they could come up with a better plan...

"Then again, I'm almost one hundred percent sure it's gotta be him," Inaba continued without waiting for a response. Evidently she wasn't really interested in getting an answer from him in the first place. "Anyway, wanna go for a walk or something? Get some fresh air? It sucks being stuck in here all day... Besides, the weather's nice."

At the same time, Aoki [age 12] got to his feet. Apparently he'd arrived at a good stopping point in his mobile game. "I wanna go, too!"

Inaba nodded approvingly. "Glad to hear it. Kids these days should get more exercise. You're coming with us, right, Yui?"

"Huh? But we can't take Iori out there..."

"Sure we can. Beats keeping her cooped up in this dilapidated hellhole, don't you think? C'mon, let's go."

And so, at Inaba's suggestion (read: demand), the five of them headed out for some fresh air.

As Aoki [age 12] and Taichi (and occasionally Kiriyama)

entertained themselves playing soccer in a vacant lot with a ball they'd found abandoned there, the sun soon began to set. Before long, Inaba gave the signal to wrap things up.

"Aww, man! Over already?" Aoki [age 12] grumbled. It seemed he still had plenty of energy to spare.

"Yeah... I think that's enough..." Taichi wheezed. *Man, I'm out of shape.*

"Haha! You're so lame!"

"Rrgh... You'll understand what it's like once you get to be my age!"

"Taichi, you sound like a middle-aged father," Kiriyma commented, pity in her eyes.

At one point earlier on, Aoki [age 12] had once again mistaken Kiriyma for Nishino Nana's older sister. For a split-second, Taichi's heart stopped—but Kiriyma just ignored it and carried on without making a big deal of it. Perhaps it was a sign that she was making an effort not to overthink it.

"I gotta say... I never dreamed there would come a day that I'd walk down the street carrying Nagase in my arms," Inaba laughed to herself as Nagase [age 1] squirmed around.

"She's been out here in the cold with us for quite a while now... You sure it's safe?" Taichi asked, concerned.

"Yeah, I was thinking we should probably head back... She's a troublemaker, this one. Having fun grabbing my chin, you little punk?"

But just before they made it back to their hideout—

"Stop right there!"

—a familiar voice rang out.

Taichi turned in the direction of the sound as a certain ponytailed girl stepped out from behind one of the buildings. It was Kiriyma's old karate rival, the same girl who had harassed them some four days prior—

"M-Mihashi-san...?" Kiriyma whispered.

Indeed, it was Mihashi Chinatsu... and she was shaking with barely-suppressed rage.

"Who's that?" Inaba asked dubiously, and Taichi quickly caught her up to speed.

But then a second person turned up.

"Yui!"

It was a girl with defiant eyes and short, reddish-brown hair styled in a bob cut, lending her a feisty sort of vibe. She seemed familiar somehow... Taichi scanned his memory.

"A-Anzu?!" Kiriyama shrieked.

Aha. Now he remembered. This was Kiriyama's younger sister Anzu. He'd met her once before—not directly, of course, but they'd spoken at one point during the body-swap era, when he'd ended up switched into Kiriyama's body. Her facial structure was remarkably similar to her older sister's, though she was actually taller.

Together, she and Mihashi stormed over to them.

"Explain yourself," Mihashi demanded.

"Explain what?"

"Don't play dumb with me. I want to know what you and your friends have been doing in this building."

"Look, Yui, we saw you sneaking into this old abandoned building! That's *trespassing!*"

Oh crap, they saw us?!

Unsure how to react, Taichi glanced around at the others. Inaba stood there quietly, as if waiting to see how things would play out.

"Worse than the trespassing... What's the deal with those kids?!" Mihashi roared, eyes wide. "I know they weren't with you when you went in! Where did they come from?! And what happened to the other two people who were with you?!" At this point, she was clearly freaking out.

"Yeah! I thought something was weird when those two came back to the building carrying shopping bags from a baby supply store!"

"Have you been keeping tabs on us all day?" asked Inaba.

"So what if we have?" Mihashi shot back defensively.

Naturally, their beloved Inaba Himeko was perfectly

unruffled—

“...Fuck.”

—Never mind.

“And then when we went in there...”

“Oh my god, you *went in there?*!” Kiriyama gasped, panicked.

“Yeah, so? Not like any of you asked permission, right? ...Anyway, when we went in there, we found all kinds of stuff... Food, blankets, a lamp, a heater...” Mihashi furrowed her brows. “But the weirdest thing of all was the *clothes!* What could you possibly need with all those different sizes of clothes?!”

“And here I was wondering why you asked Mom if we still had any old clothes from when we were little!”

“Now *explain!*” the two girls shouted at Kiriyama.

“Um... Well...” she stammered, unsure how to respond.

“Hmmm... This is looking pretty bad,” Inaba muttered.

“Yeahhh... Sounds like they saw a lot more than they should have...” Taichi replied.

“Not just that. It’s almost five.”

“Oh god! This is so much worse than just ‘pretty bad’!”

After all, if they stayed here long enough, Nagase [age 1] and Aoki [age 12] would transform back, and that brought with it its own set of... complications...

“Agreed. This is really, really bad.”

“How are you so calm right now?!”

Seriously, it’s freaking me out! Wake up, Inaba Himeko!

“I’m working on a game plan. Now that they’ve seen us go in here, we can’t just pretend the kids are our relatives. So I’ve got another excuse in mind, but I can already tell it’ll take too much time to convince them. Thus, I’ve decided to make a run for it.”

“...What?”

“I’m gonna take Lori and Aoki back behind the building, and I need you to buy me some time.”

“O-Okay...?”

With that, Inaba took off running, one hand wrapped tightly around Nagase [age 1], the other clutching Aoki [age 12]'s.

"What the—Where are you going?!" Mihashi shouted after them. "And who even *are* you?!" she snapped at Aoki [age 12] when he glanced back.

"Who, me? I'm—ouch!"

"Shut up and run!"

"Don't hit me!"

"Dah!"

"Pipe down, Iori!"

And so Inaba dashed off with the kids in tow.

"COME BACK HERE! ...What's *your* problem?" Mihashi snapped as Taichi intercepted her pursuit.

"I think *you're* the one with the problem," Taichi retorted.

"Hmph!" Mihashi snorted. "Fine, whatever. I'll just ask you, then. First things first—what's the story with that baby?"

"Um... She's... the daughter of a family friend..." Kiriyama stammered hesitantly, glancing back at Taichi for confirmation.

"Why do you keep looking at him?" After a second, Anzu gasped, eyes wide. "Yui... Don't tell me you... y-y-you had a baby with him?!"

"No! It's not my baby, genius! When was I ever pregnant?!"

"Oh, right... Okay, well... What about the girl who was holding her?! Is that the mom?!"

"N-No!"

"Really? But if we assume this guy's the dad—"

"Why would you assume that?! He's still in high school, you know!"

"So? Teen pregnancy is a thing!"

"Okay, yes, it's technically a thing... But in this case, I promise you, he didn't knock anyone up!"

"But then how do you explain the love triangle?!"

“What love triangle!?”

“You and him and that other girl! Wait... Come to think of it... I remember you telling me about a ‘nice little moment’ between you and some boy... and this guy matches the description...!”

“Y-Y-You get your butt over here right now, missy!”

Taichi and Mihashi stared blankly as Kiriyma dragged her sister around the corner. They stood around awkwardly for a few minutes; then, mercifully, Kiriyma returned, though mysteriously without Anzu.

“...What was that about?” Taichi asked.

Kiriyma wiped the sweat from her brow with a sigh. “I pulled rank as her older sister, basically... God, I’m so tired.”

Clearly he must have just imagined that strange whimpering sound.

“My sister’s a good person at heart, but sometimes she can blow things, like, *way* out of proportion.”

“So it seems...”

It seemed like a personal issue between the two of them, so Taichi decided not to comment further. He got the sense there was never a dull moment in the Kiriyma household, to say the least.

“You might’ve gotten rid of Anzu-chan, but I’m still here. Don’t ignore me,” Mihashi grumbled with a pouty look on her face that was almost cute.

“Alright... Well, you see...”

And so Taichi and Kiriyma rigged up an “explanation” built on lies, flattery, and the promise to go into further detail at a later time.

“...Enough. I don’t care anymore...” Mihashi sighed. She seemed pretty worn out, which made sense considering she’d been spying on their hideout all day.

Kiriyma smiled in relief. “Okay, well, now that you understand, we need to get going. Right, Taichi?”

While they connived, Mihashi’s expression twisted darkly. How she must have felt in that moment, Taichi couldn’t

begin to wager a guess.

“Say, Kiriyama... What sort of stuff does your club do, anyway?”

“Huh? The club? Well, it’s called the Cultural Research Club... but normally we just hang out in the clubroom, goof off, entertain ourselves...”

“At least tell her about the actual *work* we do...”

“Oh, right! So we publish this newspaper thing called the Culture Bulletin, where we write articles about our hobbies and interests... Wait... Have we basically been phoning it in this whole time?!?”

“You only just now realized that...?”

Why does she come to the clubroom, if not to goof off...?

“What, so your whole club is just a joke?” Mihashi asked with venom in her voice.

“I mean, sure, you could say that—”

“Then what’s the point?” Mihashi cut in.

Kiryama’s expression stiffened. “I don’t... understand what you’re asking...?”

“Do you have a goal you’re working towards?”

“Well, I...” Kiriyama faltered.

“Like, for real, what are you even doing with your life?”

“Wh-What kind of question is that...?” Kiriyama laughed... weakly, awkwardly.

This only served to piss Mihashi off.

“Fucking coward... Grow a spine!”

“What’s your problem?! Why are you being such a bitch?!?” Kiriyama snapped back. Evidently Mihashi’s anger was contagious.

“What happened to you?! You used to be so badass!”

“And?! Who cares about what I was like in the past?! I sure don’t!”

“Well, you should! You’re nothing compared to the way you used to be!”

“So what?! People change! That’s life! I don’t give a crap about the way things were!”

"You seriously don't even care...?" Mihashi asked, her expression tinged with betrayal. "Then... what about the conversation we had? The promise we made?! Was it all lies?!"

"I don't care about some old promise!"

Instantly Mihashi's face crumpled, on the verge of tears. This caused Kiriyama to lose steam considerably.

"Wh... What's the big deal?" she asked in a small voice.

In response, Mihashi gritted her teeth... and flung off her bomber jacket. As it happened, Taichi was in the perfect position to catch it, so he did.

"I'll just have to give you a wake-up call. Spar with me," Mihashi growled.

For a moment, Kiriyama looked utterly taken aback... but then her lip curled darkly. "That's funny... I can't recall you ever beating me," she remarked as she unbuttoned her duffel coat and flung it into the air.

Naturally, Taichi caught this one too; that said, his male ego was starting to take a hit at the thought that he'd been reduced to essentially a coat stand.

"Taichi, on your signal."

"O-Okay." *Make that coat stand and referee.* Their combined aura was so intimidating that he had no choice but to accept. "Three... two... one... S-Start!"

No sooner had the last word left his lips than the two girls kicked off from the ground. The wind danced as the earth itself shook... At least, that's how it felt for an outside observer like Taichi. As they closed in, he could scarcely make out their motions—but a moment later, he could tell the match was over.

Mihashi Chinatsu came to a stop mid-roundhouse kick, her right foot less than an inch from Kiriyama Yui's ear.

"Normally it would never be this easy," Mihashi spat as she lowered her leg. "You're weak. What have you even been *doing* these past three years?"

Kiryama stared back blankly. "It... It's not my fault..." she

choked out in a pained, watery voice. “I... I didn’t have a choice, okay?!”

“So what?” Mihashi replied coldly.

Indeed, it wasn’t Kiriyama’s fault. She had a perfectly valid reason for quitting—but ultimately, she did in fact quit. And sometimes that was more critical than the reasoning behind it.

“If you didn’t have a choice, then just tell me why,” Mihashi demanded, but Kiriyama stayed silent. “No? Figures. Fine, whatever. I’m done.” With that, she snatched her jacket back from Taichi and walked off.

When they went back inside the building, they found that Nagase and Aoki were still very much [age 1] and [age 12], respectively.

“Sorry... I thought it was later than it was. Turns out it wasn’t even close to five,” Inaba explained, to Taichi’s surprise. It wasn’t like her to make such a careless mistake. “So, how’d things go?”

“Fine, mostly. I want to hear about this ‘excuse’ you’ve come up with, though.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get to that. I gotta say, I’m impressed we managed to survive being seen... or maybe we were just lucky that the witnesses didn’t know anyone but Yui, and Yui herself didn’t end up Regressing today. Speaking of...” Inaba glanced over at the corner of the room, where Kiriyama sat curled up in a ball with a look of abject misery on her face. “Is it just me, or does our MVP look totally destroyed? What’s that about?”

“Well...” Taichi began, but then Aoki [age 12] hopped to his feet.

“Aw, cheer up, Nishino-san! ...Oh, wait, that’s not your name, huh? I thought for sure—”

“God, will you *shut the hell up?!*” Kiriyama roared out of nowhere. “I don’t know any stupid Nishino Nana, okay?! My name is *Kiryama Yui!*”



Aoki [age 12] froze in place like a statue. “Um... O-Okay... Sorry...” he stammered.

At his apology, Kiriyama snapped back to her senses. “No, I mean... Ugh, I’m the one who should apologize. I’m sorry for jumping down your throat like that... You didn’t deserve it... I’m really sorry...”

“It’s okay...”

“No it’s not... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...”

Something was falling apart. Something was breaking down. But without any firsthand experience with the Regression, Taichi couldn’t begin to understand how it made them feel. Not only that, but the problem itself was of a personal nature, and he had no right to intrude on that.

The past was immutable, and as far as he could see, there was no way forward.

+ + +

They told me I mistook Yui for “Nishino Nana’s older sister” again during the last Regression.

Real talk, Nana doesn’t even *have* an older sister... but I didn’t know that back then, so I guess whenever I Regress to that age, I take one look at Yui and assume she must be related to Nana. God, I’m so freakin’ stupid. Makes me wanna punch myself in the face.

Nah, y’know what? Let’s do it.

BAM!

Owww. Dang, that hurt.

‘Course, I can’t deny the physical resemblance is there. Same upturned eyes, same shapely brows, same proportions... and last but not least, the same long reddish-brown hair. They’re not twins or anything, but they definitely look like they could be related.

I first met Nishino Nana back in third or fourth grade. I spotted her being bothered by some weirdo, so I ran up, grabbed her hand, and dragged her away. Pretty cliché, I

know.

After I walked her back to her house, I realized that we lived pretty close to each other. Plus, her parents took a liking to me... so from then on, we would hang out and play from time to time.

Being with her was so much fun, and it seemed like she felt the same way. Our friendship continued right up to middle school, at which point she confessed her feelings to me, and we became an item.

That said, we were seventh graders, so our relationship wasn't serious, or intense. We'd go to the movies, the mall, the amusement park—stuff like that. We never even kissed; holding hands was the farthest we went.

You could say that what we did wasn't really "dating," but... at the time, I really loved her. After Regressing back to that era of my life, I can remember it all so clearly.

But then, right as we graduated from seventh grade, Nana's parents had to move away for work reasons. Once again, she was the one who started the conversation—only this time, we were breaking up.

"Not like we'd be able to spend time together anyway," she'd said.

She wasn't moving out of the country or anything... but to a tween still too young to drive a car, the distance was impossible to deal with. We had no choice but to break up.

Looking back, I don't blame us. After all, that's just how middle school romance goes, right? Nobody that young could manage a long-distance relationship. And so the curtain fell on Aoki Yoshifumi's first love.

I loved her. A lot. I loved her so damn much, dude. But then it ended...

It *did* end, right?

So what happened to my feelings for her? Are they still knockin' around inside me somewhere?

At this point in time I'm completely, undeniably in love with Kiriyama Yui. The biggest part of my attraction to her

was simply... gut instinct. But what does that actually mean? Why did I choose her over all others? Was it... because she looks like the girl I used to love?

Am I actually just still in love with Nishino Nana? Is that why I think I love Yui—because of the resemblance?

No, that can't be it. No. No way.

It can't have been on purpose. After all, I hardly ever even think about Nana these days. But... what if it was a choice I made subconsciously?

A few months ago I probably would've laughed it off. "A subconscious choice? Yeah, right!"

But now... now that I can directly compare the way I felt for Nana with the way I feel for Yui... I can't deny the possibility.

Right now, I'm positive my love for Yui is stronger. After all, we've spent a ton of time together. But what if Nana never moved away? Who would I have fallen for? I can't even guess.

Love is formless. Immeasurable. Unpredictable.

If I can't even put stock in my own feelings, then what gives me the right to claim I love anyone in the first place?

I can't even take the next step on my own. Now that I've started questioning myself, I've realized I don't have the answers... and now I'm at a standstill.

Should I really let myself be in love with Yui when she doesn't even—

...Yeah, I know I'm just tryin' to play the blame game. And I know it's not very cool of me. But sometimes I can't help thinkin' it. I just wish she would give me a chance.

I've been professing my feelings for her for a looong time now. Been doing my best to try to express how I feel. I've even set up multiple serious conversations about it. Like, legit "declarations of love." Plural. But has any of it made an impact on her? How much of my love does she truly understand?

What happens to love when it isn't reciprocated? Does it

lay there forgotten, or does it rot away to nothing?

I've been nothin' but upfront this whole time—and yet Yui won't meet me eye-to-eye. I know she's her own person with her own way of doin' things, but... In the end, I just don't know if she's okay with how I feel about her.

If I stopped tellin' her I love her, would our love story end before it ever began?

Chapter 5: New Year's Eve

The Regression didn't take any days off. Thus, the five of them were forced to once again meet up at their hideout on New Year's Eve. (But this time they made sure to check for spies first.)

"She's late!" Inaba spat as she slammed her hand down on her chosen desk.

It was 11:55 AM, and yet there was still no sign of Nagase Iori. Should she be selected for Regression today, if she failed to arrive by noon... there would be trouble, to say the least.

"I'll totally be on time," my ass..." Inaba grumbled.

Just then, the door flew open. "Sorry I'm late!" Nagase blurted as she dashed into the room.

"You *better* be sorry, you dumbass!"

"I really am, I promise! There was a tiny little incident this morning, that's all!" Her voice sounded as chipper as always, but her hair was a mess, and her eyes were puffy.

"Whoa... What happened?" asked Taichi.

"Like I said, just a really tiny thing. No cause for concern!" she insisted.

Her energy felt distinctly forced.

That day, the Regression struck Inaba and Kiriyama. Their bodies shrank slightly, and their faces got a bit rounder, but other than that, the physical changes were slight (minus Kiriyama's hair, which shrank to a pixie cut). Taichi estimated them to be approximately middle school age.

Just another day, he thought.

But oh, how very wrong he was.

All of a sudden, Regressed-Kiriyama let out an ear-

piercing scream.

"What is it?! What's wrong?!" Taichi tried to approach her, but she let out a muffled shriek and stumbled backwards.

"Move, Taichi!" Nagase shouted, pushing him out of the way. She walked up to Kiriyama and crouched down at her eye level. "What's wrong, Yui? Are you okay?"

"M... M-Man... He... I..."

"Yeah, I know. It's okay. Just calm down. Take a deep breath." Nagase stroked Kiriyama's back as she began to shake violently. "There you go... There's nothing to be scared of. You're safe now."

Once Kiriyama [age 14] had calmed down, the first thing they did was sit her down and ask her for her age, along with Inaba [age 14]. Then the three of them stepped away to converse in private, leaving Inaba [age 14] to quietly read a book while Kiriyama [age 14] sat stock-still, shooting furtive glances at Taichi and Aoki like a skittish little stray cat.

"Don't you think she's kind of overreacting?" Taichi muttered.

Nagase glared at him. "Taichi! I don't appreciate your tone!"

"L-Look, I get it, okay? But... I mean, how did she go to school in that condition?"

"Fair point... I'm not sure. Maybe she Regressed specifically to a point in time directly after the rape attempt?"

"Can the Regression really *do* that...? Well, then again, I guess if it can transform us into our childhood selves and jumble up our memories, it can do pretty much anything..."

"Whoa. You sounded like Inaban for a minute there!"

"Aw, knock it off. You're making me blush."

"...Why would that make you blush?"

"N-No reason! It just feels like you're calling me smart, that's all! Nothing else implied!"

"Bahaha! You're so jumpy!"

Just like that, the tension in the room lifted, and Taichi realized this must have been her end goal all along. She'd seemed to be in low spirits when she first arrived, but perhaps he'd simply been overthinking it.

"What about you? What do you think?" Nagase asked Aoki, who had been oddly quiet.

"...Huh? Oh, uh, yeah... I dunno."

"Pay attention you must, or punch you I will!" Nagase joked in her best Yoda voice.

But Aoki didn't seem quite himself. Normally he would've been the first person to try to console Kiriyama when she screamed, and yet he didn't move an inch.

"...Will you quit flinching at every little thing? It's distracting," Inaba [age 14] commented without taking her eyes off her book.

"Huh? Oh... umm... sorry," Kiriyama [age 14] replied.

"Hmph... Are you seriously just going to sit there and twiddle your thumbs? Hardly the most productive use of your time, don't you think?"

"G-Good point... In that case, I guess I'll read... this..." Kiriyama [age 14] gingerly reached for the stack of books piled neatly on the desk in front of Inaba [age 14]—none of which looked to be appropriate for a middle school reading level. (Inaba had brought them in the event that her Regressed self needed something to entertain herself with.)

"Not that I mind, but... Are you sure you *can*?"

"P-Probably not..."

At this, Inaba [age 14] snorted and went back to her book. As for Kiriyama [age 14], she hung her head in shame.

Meanwhile, Taichi and Nagase watched them from a distance. (Aoki had gone off to the corner store to use the restroom.)

"Wow... Inaban was pretty mouthy a couple years back..."

"She's not a bad person, but she tends to come off pretty harsh, yeah..."

Nagase turned and looked into Taichi's eyes. "You won't like her less because of this, will you?"

Taichi held her gaze. "Of course not... It's all in the past. Besides, I know she doesn't mean any harm."

Nagase grinned. "Good." Evidently she was sincerely glad to hear it.

As usual, he could never quite get a read on her... He hoped this would improve with time.

"I can't believe today's the last day of the year... So much has happened, you know?" she continued in a soft, wistful voice.

"Too much, if you ask me. First the body-swap, then the Liberation..."

"What would you say was the biggest moment of the year for you?"

"Hmmm... If I had to choose one... The first run-in with «Heartseed», I guess?"

"Excuse me?" Nagase pouted.

"What? What else do you want me to say?"

Nagase grinned sheepishly. "You're *supposed* to say 'the moment we met,' dummy."

Like the sun shining down upon the barren earth, her pure, untainted smile took his breath away with its sheer radiance.

"Uh... Wow... Th-That was quite a line..."

The room was chilly, and yet he was starting to sweat.

"Huh? Wait... Ack! No, no, no! I didn't mean it like that!" She held her hands up defensively. "I mean, that's part of it, but... I meant 'we' as in the whole club!" Her whole face was flushed.

"Oh... Right. Sorry, I jumped to the wrong conclusion there." Taichi looked away, embarrassed to have misunderstood her.

Nagase seemed to interpret this differently, however. "B- But obviously you're an important part of that! Like, if... if I had to name someone in particular, obviously you'd be

number one with a bullet—*Gaahhhh, what am I saying?!*”

“R-Relax! I get it! Let’s just take a deep breath, alright?”

“Y-Yes, sir! Roger that!”

Taichi glanced back at Inaba [age 14] and Kiriyama [age 14] to find them both staring, mouths agape, in their direction. When he met their gazes, Inaba [age 14] went back to her book with a smirk, and Kiriyama [age 14] quickly looked away.

Nagase cleared her throat awkwardly. “Anyway... Off-topic, but how do you feel about New Year’s? To me it’s more of a family holiday, so it kinda sucks that we’re stuck here. What about you?”

“Yeahhh... I’m starting to catch a lot of flak for being gone so much during the holidays. ‘Where are you going? You need to help us clean the house!’ and all that. I try to do as much as I can in the mornings, though.”

Currently his biggest problem was his little sister, who was thoroughly displeased with him as of late. That morning as he was getting ready to leave, she complained that he was never around to spend time with her or help her with her homework. (He tried to tell her that you’re really supposed to do your homework by yourself, but she shot back “The Taichi I know would never turn it down when asked to help! I don’t even know you anymore!” and he briefly questioned whether she might only like him for his usefulness... Surely not, right?)

“What’s your situation like, Nagase? It’s just you and your mom, right?”

“Not right now—uhh, I mean, yep! Just me and Mom!”

“Huh? Which is it?”

“Like you said, it’s just me and Mom. So, yeah... I feel pretty bad leaving her all by herself for the holidays...” All at once, her previously cheerful expression clouded over. “I’m... really worried, actually.”

“Gotcha... Hopefully the Regression ends soon.”

Says the guy who isn’t even part of it.

Taichi was the only one who knew the truth, and yet he was powerless to do anything.

"At least we get to go home at night," Nagase said firmly, her eyes full of conviction. "And tonight I'll be ringing in the new year, just me and my family."

To Taichi, she sounded a bit too serious for what was ultimately an ordinary holiday, but he didn't question it.

Five o'clock rolled around. Inaba [age 14] and Kiriyama [age 14] began to groan in pain, and the next thing they knew, the Regression ended for the day.

"Huh...? Oh, I get it. Must've struck me today. What age was I?" asked Inaba.

"Fourteen," Taichi answered. "Same age as Kiriyama, as a matter of fact."

He glanced over in Kiriyama's direction to find her with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, as though she were freezing cold. Through messy strands of chestnut-colored hair, he caught a glimpse of her unusually pale complexion.

"Uh, Kiriyama?"

"Yui?! Are you okay?!" shouted Nagase as she dashed over.

Kiryama's voice came out in a hoarse whisper.

"I... I remembered... everything... All of it."

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After dinner, I told them I was going to my room. "I'll come back downstairs in a little bit."

"Feeling sick, sweetheart?" my mom asked.

"No, Mom. Just tired," I answered.

"Do you still want some soba noodles at midnight?" she asked.

"We can make them when I come back down later," I replied.

With that, she finally let me go in peace, although it was

obvious she was still worried about me.

When I got to my room, I flung myself down on my bed. *She's too soft on me these days, I thought. She used to be a bit more strict. At the very least, she would never have let me act like a spoiled princess.*

I'd forgotten she used to be like that... but then one fateful day, everything changed.

All that stuff I tried not to think about—all the things I tried to forget—I remember it all now.

It hurts to remember the fear I felt the moment I thought I was about to be raped... but it hurts worse to think about the past.

I had dreams back then. Big, stupid, childish dreams. I can't pretend I forgot about them completely—I didn't. But I tried so hard not to think about them. I put a lid on it... and then, before I knew it, a layer of dust and cobwebs had settled over that lid.

But, of course, then the stupid Regression came along, yanked the lid off, and dumped it all out right in front of me in all its shining glory. And I'd been trying to ignore it, but... God, I just can't anymore.

I practiced karate because *I wanted to be number one*. Nothing more, nothing less. And I sincerely believed I could do it.

Number one what, though? Number one in tournaments? Number one in Japan, or number one in the world? Number one woman, or number one period?

Back then, I didn't have an answer to that. As far as I was concerned, the sky was the limit. I wasn't thinking too hard or too far ahead; I lived each moment focused on taking the next step.

Back then, I was strong.

I don't mean in a physical sense, or in terms of skill.

Back then, I had the strength to move forward.

I didn't always win. Sometimes I lost—but I never let it get me down. I always picked myself right back up and gave it

another shot.

But now I'm weak. After that fateful day, I just... shut down. And now I can't pick myself back up. I can't even take the next step on my own. I have nothing left. After everything my friends have given me, I have nothing to give back.

At one point I made a promise with Mihashi Chinatsu, my local tournament rival—a girl who hated losing to me with a fiery passion.

Since she was moving away, and our style of karate didn't hold nationals at the middle school level, we wouldn't be seeing each other anymore. Up until then she'd barely ever talked to me, but that day she called out to me, her face beet red, and said—

"Next time we meet, it'll be at the high school level nationals tournament. And I'm gonna kick your ass."

I'd always assumed she hated me, but that was the day I realized I was wrong. If anything, she obviously respected me a lot if she wanted to spar again at nationals. At the time, I was really flattered—so I agreed.

"I'll see you then. It's a promise."

Clearly Mihashi took that promise super seriously, too. But it was a promise I failed to keep—a promise I forgot I ever made. Why? Because I threw my dreams in the trash. Dismissed it all as "in the past." And I let everyone coddle and shelter me as I continued to live out an empty existence.

There was a guy who always used to tell me he loved me, but now he doesn't say it anymore. If not him, then who? Who will love me? Who will accept me and tell me I have value?

Nobody.

I have no worth. I'm just a pointless NPC character in the RPG of life—utterly replaceable.

Yup. I'm just a replacement goldfish for Aoki's precious Nishino Nana.

But so what if I am? I'm nobody special. Girls like me are a dime a dozen. Whatever it is that makes somebody special, I don't have it. And I'll never have it, no matter how hard I try. Nothing I can do about it; I just don't have a choice. That's why I don't bother trying harder than I need to.

So who cares?

It's all so pointless. Disgustingly pointless.

"Kiriyama Yui" is just an empty vessel.

An NPC who cries like she's a protagonist.

Chapter 6: Goodbye

Thus began a new year.

To normal people, this was an important milestone... but to *certain otherworldly entities who shall go unnamed*, it was just another day. And so it was that January 1st saw the Regression strike Nagase, Kiriymama, and Aoki.

Nevertheless, Inaba adamantly refused to let any supernatural phenomenon get in the way of her life, and so the five of them paid a visit to their local Shinto shrine to celebrate *hatsumoude*. This, of course, ended in relative disaster, as previously shown.

“Looking at what happened today, I’d hate to imagine how the rest of the year’s gonna play out,” Inaba muttered after they left the shrine.

“I’m already exhausted just thinking about it,” Taichi groaned. Lately he’d had a hell of a time managing the phenomenon. Today wasn’t their first time experiencing a three-person Regression; in fact, just the other day it had seen fit to strike *all four at once*. (Thankfully their Regressed ages had fallen on the older side, so it wasn’t too bad.)

This was quite possibly the most miserable New Year’s Day of his life... and he could only pray that today’s events wouldn’t be indicative of the year to come.



The next morning, as Taichi was getting ready to leave the house, he heard the soft pattering of footsteps that signaled Rina coming down the stairs. Bracing himself for another scolding, he turned to look.

Unfortunately, it was much, much worse than a scolding.

In stark contrast to his usual reality, there stood «The Second», piloting his little sister's body.

“...Long time no see?” it offered.

For a second, he forgot how to breathe. What was it doing here? Why had it possessed her again?

“Having a hard time?” it asked.

“...Damn right we are. So why don't you cut us some slack and end this already?”

They were all starting to run out of cover stories to tell their families. Stress levels were running high. Any longer and things could get dangerous fast. In fact, there was no telling whether they might already be past the point of no return.

“No. I have not found my answer.” «The Second» froze perfectly still for a moment. “...But you have been seen. Should I end it? Or just a little longer...”

“So you'll end it, then?” The mere possibility was music to his ears. “Well? Are you going to end it or not?”

“...Perhaps.”

«The Second»'s wishy-washy attitude took the wind out of his sails. *Would it kill you to commit to a yes or no answer?*

“Maybe something will happen soon? Then I will get my answer?”

Answer to what?

“And yet... so complicated...”

“Yeah, things are getting complicated, alright. But what do you mean by that, exactly?”

“...When I look at your heart, I see it. So very complicated. But you haven't noticed?”

“Noticed what?”

Obviously he knew it was starting to take a toll on everyone's emotional well-being... and that it had put a dent in the friendship between Kiriyama and Aoki. The latter was particularly painful to witness, considering Aoki's aggressive courting had recently started to pay off, or so it seemed. Taichi wished there was something he could do to help... but

ultimately, it was something only Kiriyama and Aoki could solve. For the time being, he tried to convince himself it was just a symptom of the phenomenon and nothing more.

“Complicated... So very complicated...”

«The Second»'s lip shifted a fraction of an inch in the world's tiniest smirk, and a shiver ran down Taichi's spine—one that had nothing to do with the cold weather.

The next moment, «The Second» was gone again.



After he got off the train, he promptly ran into Kiriyama and Aoki at the station. Together, with Taichi in the middle, the three of them headed off to the abandoned building.

There was some idle conversation along the way, but it wasn't particularly enjoyable. Kiriyama and Aoki never spoke to each other directly. There was an awkward tension in the air, and Taichi lacked the conversational skill needed to resolve it.

Then, right as they turned down the street that led to their hideout, they encountered a familiar face approaching them from the opposite direction. It was Mihashi Chinatsu, hair pulled back in her usual ponytail, looking as cold and haughty as ever.

“Sure enough, here you are again,” Mihashi called out from a few meters away, where she came to a stop. “Got some different people with you this time, I see. Oh, but you're always with *him*, aren't you? Are you guys dating or what?”

“We are *not* dating,” said Kiriyama in a small voice.

For a moment, Mihashi hesitated.

“Who's that?” Aoki asked quietly.

“Old frenemy of Kiriyama's. We told you about her, remember?” Taichi whispered back.

“O-Okay, whatever. Anyway, could you please just tell me why you quit karate? I just... I need to know for my own

peace of mind. Otherwise I'll go crazy." She seemed a lot calmer than she'd been in previous encounters. Less aggressive, too.

But just when Taichi thought maybe they'd be able to have a reasonable conversation—

"...It's none of your business," Kiriyama stated dispassionately, turning away.

"E-Excuse you? What's with your attitude?"

"I don't have an attitude. I'm just telling it like it is."

"And I'm just trying to ask you a question!"

"Well, drop it already!" Kiriyama snapped.

"I... I *would* if you would just tell me!"

"I quit, okay? End of story!"

"But what about our promise?!"

"Will you just forget the stupid promise already?! That was then! This is now!"

This dealt a crippling blow to Mihashi, who was visibly hurt.

Kiriyama stared at the ground, struggling to keep her expression blank and emotionless.

That was when *Aoki* of all people piped up. "Okay, look... I know I don't got all the details and stuff, but... I think you oughta give your friend here a chance," he told Kiriyama. "Open up and have a real heart-to-heart, y'know?"

A moment of silence passed. Then Kiriyama's face began to flush red with rage. "Excuse me? Since when are you my therapist?"

"I'm just sayin', you gotta look at it from her point of view —"

"*You* have no right to lecture me about this, you gutless pig!" Kiriyama roared.

"Gutless. Right. You would know," Aoki shot back, gritting his teeth.

"Did you seriously just say that to me?!"

"Yeah, well, can you blame me?"

"Well, you're just a... a *fuckboy* who only likes me because

I look like some other girl!" she screamed, nearly on the verge of tears. Evidently this accusation hurt her just as much as it hurt him.

Aoki's expression twisted in misery... but Kiriyma kept going.

"Just get your stupid act together already!"

"Look, I'm tryin', alright?!"

"No you're not!"

"Yes I am!"

Their heated exchange began to blaze out of control.

"You're just a coward who never takes anything seriously! You just do whatever you feel like!"

"Quit freakin' calling me a coward, okay?! If anyone's not taking this seriously, it's *you*, Yui!"

"Excuse me?!"

"When was the last time you actually *paid attention* to the way you make other people feel? You don't give anyone the time of day—not even your friend here!"

"That's... That's not true!"

"Yeah? Name *one time* you actually tried!"

"Well... I... But...!"

"But what?!"

"I just... I just don't have a choice...!"

"Prove it!"

"Huh? But..."

"You know what I think? I think you're just making excuses so you don't have to try!"

"I..." Kiriyma faltered, then buried her face in her hands.

Belatedly, Taichi stepped in between them. "L-Let's dial it back a bit, alright, Aoki? ...Kiriyma, you okay?"

"Sorry," Aoki said to no one in particular, then walked off toward their hideout.

Taichi glanced at Mihashi, and their eyes met.

"Well, um..." she stammered, glancing around awkwardly, before turning on her heel. "Anyway, it sounds like you guys have enough on your plate right now, so..." With that, she

put her head down and quietly walked away.

With no words of comfort to offer her, all Taichi could do was watch her go. Beside him, he could hear Kiriyama sniffling.

“C’mon, don’t cry...” He moved to reach out to her—but stopped himself. After all, he knew she had a strong aversion to physical contact from guys.

The next moment, she crumpled to the ground, silently wiping her tears.

“K-Kiriyama? You okay?”

Both she and Aoki were in so much pain; Taichi felt like his heart was being torn in two. He wanted to help them... but he had no way to fix it. He could neither mend their wounds nor stop them lashing out at each other.

He was powerless.

Once again, the Regression struck precisely at noon. For a phenomenon that was supposedly going to end soon, it sure didn’t feel like it.

Nagase and Inaba both Regressed to [age 6], while Aoki Regressed to [age 14]. Almost immediately afterwards, the latter spotted Kiriyama and called out to her.

“‘Scuse me, but... are you maybe related to Nishino Nana-san?”

It was the worst possible question, and Taichi was afraid Kiriyama might snap. But instead she held back, gritting her teeth and clutching one hand to her chest.

“...No. My name is Kiriyama Yui.” She wasn’t crying, but her voice shook with emotion.

“Oh, my bad. So you’re Kiriyama-san, yeah? Roger that!” Aoki [age 14] grinned.

Nagase [age 6] and Inaba [age 6] were both perfectly well-behaved, which made babysitting a walk in the park. So much so, in fact, that Taichi had seen fit to delegate the task to Aoki [age 14]. While he maintained a somewhat frivolous attitude, he soon proved responsible when it came to

looking after the girls.

"He doesn't seem much different at this age..." Taichi mused to himself, only to regret it a second later when he realized Kiriyma probably heard him.

"Hey, Taichi?" she asked, gazing at him with pain in her eyes.

"Y-Yeah?"

"What would you do if I told you that... I was in love with you?"

Instantly, his mind went blank. "Wh... whuhh?! Wh-What are you talking about?!"

"I'm in love with you, Taichi."

"Hold it! Stop! Back up! That's... just gonna make this complicated!"

Just as he was scrambling to figure out how to react to this, she turned away. Her long hair fell over her eyes, concealing her expression.

"...Suppose for a minute that someone said that to you for real. Like, a lot."

Oh, thank god. It's just a hypothetical scenario... Wait, are we talking about what I think we're talking about?

"Now suppose that same person stopped saying it at one point. What do you do in that situation?"

Kiriyma was being much more open than he was used to, and he wasn't sure how to respond... but he knew she deserved an answer.

"Well... It would depend on how I felt about it, right?"

"Yeah..." she murmured, and the conversation ended there.

At five o'clock, the kids transformed back. As soon as the girls had finished getting dressed, Kiriyma left the building, stating that she had to get back home as soon as possible.

Normally the mood in the room post-Regression was light and cheerful, but today it was suffocatingly heavy. The building itself felt... darker, somehow.

"I missed my chance to ask this morning, but... did something happen earlier today?" Inaba asked Taichi.

"Yeah. We bumped into Mihashi-san on the way here, and then Aoki and Kiriyama got into this ridiculous argument..."

"I'm guessing it was a pretty big one?" Nagase asked as she wandered over.

"Definitely. Kiriyama started crying and everything."

"Gotcha," Nagase muttered sadly.

Inaba sighed. "I'm sure it's just a lovers' spat. Something like this was bound to happen."

"Yeah, especially considering how overly direct Aoki can be with his feelings," Nagase agreed.

Meanwhile, Aoki lay slumped over a desk, his head resting on his arms. The cracks in his relationship with Kiriyama had now developed into an ever-widening gulf. Could it be mended, or was it beyond repair?

They used to be so close, too—nearly on the cusp of a romantic development, or so it seemed to an outside observer like Taichi. If it weren't for the Regression, perhaps things would have worked out differently... or perhaps this was destined to happen one way or another. Either way, Taichi hated to see it.

So he headed over to Aoki.

Maybe he was acting out of line by trying to butt in on something that was none of his business. Still, he couldn't help it. All this time, he'd watched their friendship grow. He knew exactly how much Aoki loved Kiriyama. And he refused to let their chemistry fizzle out over one measly conflict. At the very least, he had to say something.

Besides, he knew from experience that it was often a lot easier to figure things out when you had a friend or two nearby to help you put the pieces together.

"Uh, Taichi? Don't you think you should let them work it out on their own?" Inaba called after him.

Yes, he knew full well this was really none of his business, but—

"We're friends. We ought to be there for each other." He didn't know where the line was, but he had to try. "...Aoki, don't you think you ought to do something to resolve this?" No response. "I'm not saying this whole thing is your fault, but... You're just not acting like yourself lately, man."

"...What does 'acting like myself' look like to you?" Aoki asked, his voice muffled.

"Well, uh... I'd say you're less passive and more... direct?"

"Direct, huh..."

"Aoki, do you not like Yui anymore?" Nagase asked, cutting straight to the root of the issue. Taichi glanced at her, and she offered him a gentle smile, letting him know she was on his side.

"No, I still do... I'm just so confused..."

"Confused how?" Nagase asked, brows furrowed.

"My memories, dude... They're all mixed up... and it feels like I'm forgettin' something, but I can't quite put my finger on it..."

Inaba heaved another sigh and walked over. "Look... I promised myself I wouldn't get involved in people's love lives anymore. Not after my little stint playing Cupid for these two... That sure didn't win me any points..." Scratching her head, she glanced at Taichi and Nagase. "So I'm not gonna get into it with you, but... I think you're overthinking it. That's all."

"Overthinkin' it?" Aoki shifted slightly.

"W-Wait... What happened to 'Aoki's a braindead moron'?! Who are you and what have you done with my Inaban?!"

"Calm down, Iori. People change, myself included... especially now that I have firsthand experience with the power of love."

Inaba smiled—a dreamy, wistful sort of smile—and Taichi found he was entranced.

"I-Inaban! You can't just drop a line like that with no warning! That's no fair!"

"Oh yeah? Well, neither is your little 'Our hearts are one!'

act you've got going on!"

Times like these, Taichi sorely wished life came with a how-to manual. Maybe someone like Watase would know how to handle a love triangle... He made a mental note to ask him later.

"...Guys... What should I do?" Aoki asked. But none of them had an answer.

"Well... That's really up to you, isn't it?" said Inaba. "All I have to say is this: being wishy-washy doesn't suit you."

"Yeah! The Aoki we know goes full speed ahead!" Nagase chimed in.

"Your laid-back attitude is part of your charm, weirdly enough," Taichi added.

"Wishy-washy... Full speed ahead... Laid-back attitude... Oh! That's it! Now I remember!" Aoki exclaimed, bolting upright in his chair. "I forgot to stop worrying!"

"Forgot to... stop worrying...? I didn't realize that was possible..." Taichi muttered.

"I decided a long time ago I'd never tear my hair out over somethin' like this... Goes against my philosophy, y'know? Man, what was I doing?" Aoki jumped to his feet. "I'm going to M Prefecture."

At this, the three of them responded in unison: "What?"

"I said I'm going to M Prefecture. Right now."

"Hold a minute. Where did *that* come from? And what's the rush?" Taichi asked.

"I'm gonna go meet up with Nishino Nana," said Aoki. The look in his eyes was firm and unwavering.

"Are you out of your mind? If you leave right now, it'll take you all night to get to M Prefecture by train. You'll be stuck there until tomorrow morning!" Inaba argued.

"So? I'll leave tonight and come back tomorrow."

"You realize traveling is hell during the holidays, right? The station will be packed... But worst of all, if you don't make it back before noon...!"

If the Regression struck him while he was out in public,

anything could happen, and none of it would be pretty.

“I know, but... I gotta do this.”

Taichi could tell Aoki’s conviction was unshakeable, without the slightest trace of hesitation.

Inaba clucked her tongue. “Look, Taichi. You started this fire, so now it’s your job to put it out.”

But Taichi shook his head. “Please, Inaba... Just let him go.”

“Right... I should’ve known you wouldn’t stop him...”

Maybe it was stupid, but... if this was what Aoki decided he needed to do, then Taichi wanted to help him see it through.

“You gotta let me do this, Inabacchan. Doin’ dumb shit is the only way I know how to move forward.”

As Inaba contemplated his request, Nagase cut in. “If you take the first bullet train out of M Prefecture, you could probably get back here pretty fast... but still, you might not have enough time to get all the way back to the hideout before noon...” She hesitated. “Why do you want to meet up with her, anyway?”

As usual, Nagase was quick to get to the point.

“To understand what it is my heart wants.”

How profoundly wise.

“Am I hallucinating, or does Aoki actually seem kinda manly for a change? Spoopy!” Nagase remarked cheerfully.

“Hey! My manliness is *not* spoopy!”

“Look, Inaban... You might as well give up. Now that you’ve experienced the power of love for yourself, you know this has to happen.”

“Nngh... Maybe you’re ri—No, wait...” Right as she was about to cave, Inaba hesitated again.

“What is it, Inabacchan?”

“What if ‘what your heart wants’ isn’t what the rest of us hope it is? What then?”

Oh.

Taichi hadn’t considered that. Instantly, the room grew

tense.

"Or... maybe you already know the answer?" Inaba pressed.

Obviously the answer is "Kiriyama," right?

"No. I don't know the answer. That's why I have to go find out." The look on his face told them he'd already made up his mind... come what may. "But... even if it's not what you hope it is... Even if..."

For the first time since this conversation started, Aoki faltered. His lip trembled as he closed his eyes and let out a long breath.

"Even if... it means I have to quit the CRC... bottom line, I gotta stay true to myself. This is the path I've chosen."

In that moment, Aoki was so strong-willed and courageous, it sent goosebumps pricking up Taichi's arms.

In that moment, he wished he was half the man Aoki was.

Inaba laughed softly. "Wow, buddy... Looks like we don't stand a chance of stopping you."

"So... does that mean you're cool with it, Inabacchan?!"

"Yeah, I guess," she sighed. "But just in case, I want Taichi to go with you, since he's the one person who's guaranteed—well, mostly guaranteed—not to Regress."

"Got it. I'll tag along, then."

At last, the gears had started to turn once more.

As for Taichi, he had no intention of trying to single-handedly take credit for "fixing" Aoki, but he did hope his actions had played some small part in helping him find his way forward.

With a little support, even the heaviest burdens could feel just a bit lighter—more proof that humans were never meant to be solitary creatures.

"Hell yeah! Then let's go, compadre! No brakes on this train! Let's skedaddle!"

"W-Wait! Where are we going to get the money for train tickets?"

"Figure it out, Taichi," said Inaba.

"It'll work out," said Nagase.

"Oh, I see! So I'm just conveniently on my own for that part! Real cool of you, guys!"

Damn it, would it kill them to foot at least part of the bill? Oh well... I'll cover it with money from my savings account, I guess... No idea how I'm going to explain this to my family, though...

"Forgetting something, Aoki?"

"Oh crap! You're right!"

Nagase tossed Aoki his stuff, and he caught it in mid-air.

"Thanks, Iori-chan!"

Meanwhile, Taichi opened the door and stepped out of the room. There, at the end of the hall... he thought he caught a glimpse of long reddish-brown hair disappearing around the corner by the stairs.

On the bullet train, Aoki began to reminisce:

"In eighth grade, one of my classmates died in a car accident."

"Oh, I heard about that. Didn't realize you went to that school." Taichi didn't know all the details, but he'd definitely seen it on the news at some point.

"I wasn't close with her or anything, but like... When someone you know dies, it really screws you up, y'know? Reminds you of your own mortality."

He glanced through the window at the cloudy and rapidly darkening sky.

"She'd been going to cram school from an early age. Did a lot of studying for entrance exams. But then she died, and it all went to waste... Not that I think she was stupid to put in all that effort, or anything like that," he quickly added. "It's just... That was what made me think, y'know, it's great to work towards a future goal and all, but you gotta still live in the moment, too."

It was an understandable sentiment, to say the least.

"So I decided I would live each day to the fullest. That

way, no matter when I kick the bucket, I'll have had a great life no matter what. And the longer I live, the better it'll get."

"And that's your personal philosophy?"

"Yep! I don't know if it's right or wrong or whatever, but I like it, so that's what I've been doin'."

As for Taichi, he had never given any real thought to his personal philosophy.

"And if I'm gonna do it, I gotta give it one hundred percent, y'know? I can't afford to slip up." He grinned.

"Alright, enough of that! Let's talk about something less boring!"

Despite his childish antics, Taichi knew he was the most mature of any of them.

After they got off the bullet train, Aoki used his phone GPS to figure out what train to take next. When they arrived at the next station, they hopped into a taxi... and then, finally, they arrived at their destination. Well, approximately.

It was nearly 10:30 PM. Rather than have the cab driver slowly drive around the neighborhood, they decided to go on foot.

"Man, it's cold up north! Why did nobody warn me?!" Aoki shouted through chattering teeth.

"Let's just hurry up and find her before we freeze to death, okay?!"

It felt like they'd discovered the true meaning of the word *bone-chilling*.

Using the return address written on the New Year's card Nishino had sent Aoki's family, the two teens made their way through the quiet, sleepy little neighborhood. The streets were lined with modern houses much larger than Taichi was used to.

"Why don't you have her number, anyway?"

"She never gave it to me. Besides, I didn't get my own cell phone until after she'd already moved away."

"Oh, gotcha..." Taichi shivered. Glancing around at all the

houses with their lights off, he wondered if everyone went to bed early in these parts—and then it hit him.

“W-Wait... Aoki... Do Nishino-san’s grandparents live around here?”

“Don’t think so... Why?”

“What if her family went out of town for the holidays?!”

“...Oh yeah.”

Taichi shuddered—and this time it wasn’t from the cold.

“Eh, it’ll work out! Probably!”

“Good grief, dude. Your reckless optimism is going to come back to bite you one of these days.”

Your “no worries” attitude can’t solve everything, you know!

“Anyway, we should be comin’ up on it here soon...”

“Cool... Which reminds me, what are you planning to say to her, anyway? And what about me? How should I—”

Suddenly, Aoki came to a stop, and Taichi instinctively fell silent.

The timing was too perfect. Almost like destiny.

A black sedan pulled up in front of a nearby two-story western-style house. There, a girl with stylish reddish-brown hair stepped out wearing a white, knee-length down coat. Beneath her shapely brows sat a pair of large, upturned eyes—face-wise, the resemblance to Kiriyama was undeniable. But that was where the similarities ended; she wore her hair fairly short, just past her chin, and her figure was curvy.

When she noticed the two of them approaching, she squinted at them for a moment. Then her eyes widened in surprise. She leaned back into the car briefly, then shut the door and came jogging over.

“Y-Yoshifumi...?” Her voice was bright and clear, like birdsong.

Snow began to fall.

Taichi stepped back a bit to give them some space.

“I... I can’t believe it... What are you doing here?” the girl—Nishino Nana—asked hesitantly as she glanced at Taichi.

"Sorry to drop in on you out of nowhere. I just really needed to see you."

"Huh? Wait... Why...?"

"Nana..."

"Y-Yes...?"

"I really loved you, Nana. But now there's someone else in my life... someone I love even more."

The snowflakes were starting to stick. It was so quiet, Taichi could nearly hear them land.

Nishino paused for a moment. Then a bittersweet smile crept up on her lips. "I'm glad."

"Sorry, I know this is totally random..."

"No, no, it's fine. Thanks for coming to see me."

A long silence fell between them. Maybe they were both struggling to find their words... or maybe they were comfortable not saying anything at all. Then Nishino glanced at Taichi again. In return, he offered her a slight wave.

"So, who's this? Wait... Don't tell me... Is *this* your 'someone else'?!"

"*No!*" they exclaimed in unison. *Whoops. Probably shouldn't shout at strangers.*

Nishino laughed. "Just thought I'd ask! Well, anyway, what are your plans for tonight? It's cold out here... Wanna come inside for a bit?"

"Nah, I'll pass. We gotta get home," said Aoki, despite the fact that they had yet to plan their return trip. "So yeah..."

"Do you like my haircut?" Nishino asked suddenly. She ran one hand through her chestnut locks until it came to rest on her shoulder, where her hair could no longer reach. "I got it done at the end of last year."

The wind picked up, sending a few stray strands across her face. It was a beautiful, picturesque moment, almost like something out of a movie.

"Looks great," Aoki replied, then scratched his head. "Mmkay, we'd better be going! Next time I see ya, let's catch

up for real, alright?"

"Sounds good," Nishino nodded.

Aoki spun on his heel. "C'mon, Taichi! Let's go home!"

"Already? You sure?"

"Sure as sure can be, my guy!" With that, he walked off, and Taichi hurried after him.

"Goodbye," they heard Nishino murmur behind them. In response, Aoki lifted a hand in acknowledgment—but he didn't turn back.

+ + +

There I was, walking through the snow with my good buddy Yaegashi Taichi. (I'm tellin' ya, the guy's a saint for puttin' up with my nonsense.)

"Welp, we'd better hurry or we'll be in major trouble... Let's run for it, Taichi!"

"What?" Taichi stared blankly back at me.

"Imma sprint back! You'd better keep up!" And with that, I dashed off.

"Sprint back to *where*?! We haven't even called the taxi company yet—no, seriously, hold on!" he shouted after me, but I ignored him and kept running. He's a good dude; I knew he'd come after me eventually, even if he wasn't enthusiastic about it... so I didn't let him stop me.

Why did I waste so much time worrying over something so simple? How didn't I see it? Love is love, nothing more and nothing less. And that's all there is to it! That's all that matters!

After all, love was never meant to be over-analyzed... just *felt*. No logic, no reasoning. If it could be solved rationally, then no one would ever struggle with it, y'know? So all you can do is feel it. Feel it with everything you have. And then you gotta have faith in that feeling.

My love for her is like a burning meteor in my chest. Why did I ever question it? Why did I bother stopping to think

about it? Maybe that works for some people—helps ‘em figure out how they feel or somethin’—and if so, rock on. But it’s definitely not my thing. I gotta follow my heart with no hesitation or else I’ll just confuse myself.

Why? Because life sucks, man. There’s dark stuff out there—stuff that will stick to you like glue if you let it. So you gotta armor up to protect yourself, and at that point it’s hard to feel anything under all those layers, y’know? So to compensate you hyper-focus on everyone around you, and in so doing you forget to pay attention to yourself... meaning you barely feel anything at all. So there you are, left with no choice but to drown yourself in this almost anaesthetic numbness, unable to see where you’re going wrong.

Sounds pretty boring, doesn’t it?

The best things in life are the simplest. And once you find them, that’s when you realize what matters most. At least, that’s what I choose to believe. And that’s why I gotta keep running at full speed.

I can’t blame my failures on other people, or else I’m just creating an excuse to slow down, and that’s not cool.

If someone doesn’t understand how I feel, then I just have to keep putting it out there at full volume.

It’s so easy. Stupidly easy.

After I Regressed back to my childhood, I realized something: kids have got all the important stuff figured out.

And that’s where I went wrong. I’m still just a kid—I gotta stay stupid.

‘Course, I can’t stay a kid forever. In the end, I’ll grow up whether I want to or not.

But I feel like once people grow up, they lose *all* the traits that made them a kid, and that includes the good ones.

Now I kinda feel like asking people on the street—*How do you live your life? Don’t you think you’d be better off living in the moment without thinking too hard? Isn’t that what life’s all about?*

I wonder what they’d say... Not that it really matters.

There's no right answer to this stuff, y'know?

Chapter 7: I Am My Own Lord

The two of them took a taxi to the nearest business hotel, where they spent the rest of the night. Then, the following morning, they caught the first bullet train home.

As they (read: Taichi) had feared, the snow caused some minor delays along the way, but thankfully they would make it back to their neighborhood with plenty of time to get to their hideout (though not enough time to stop by their houses first, unfortunately).

As they stepped off the train onto the station platform, Aoki stretched his arms widely. "Whew... Home at last! It's cold, but not *that* cold, y'know? But it's still freakin' cold!"

"Man, I'm beat... And we've got a whole day of Regression ahead of us, too..."

"Aw, chin up, Taichi! It'll fly by before ya know it!"

"How do you have so much energy after all that...?"

Seriously, the guy was way too chipper. Maybe he'd built up some energy reserves while he was brooding over the past few days.

"Alright, Taichi, let's sprint all the way there!"

"What? Why? We can still make it if we just walk!"

"There's something I gotta tell Yui, ASAP. Let's go!"

"I told you to quit running! Did you forget faceplanting yesterday when you slipped on the ice?!"

And so the two of them arrived at the abandoned building. They had run so fast, it took several minutes for both of them to catch their breath.

"Next time... if you need to communicate something ASAP... let's keep it to a light jog at best..."

"N-No way... What's the... point in that...?"

Taichi didn't really understand his logic, but whatever.

"Why would you waste your energy running all the way here? Are you people braindead?" Inaba regarded them coldly. Predictably, she was less than impressed.

"Oh, *Taichiii...!*" Nagase called out in a singsong voice.
"Where's our souvenirs?"

"Didn't bring any."

"Wh-WHAT?! You went on a trip and didn't even get us any souvenirs?!"

"I didn't go there for fun..."

"Yeah, but you were just along for the ride, right? So the whole point of you being there was to buy souvenirs! Right?!"

"Frankly, I don't remember the topic of souvenirs entering the picture at any point."

"I'm not sure what you were expecting, Iori," Inaba cut in.

Finally, someone around here is on my side—

"This is why I told you to ask him over email. Good grief."

"...Could you guys maybe not treat me like a walking ATM? Just a thought."

Seriously, the cost of that trip had been nothing to sneeze at.

"Isn't it only natural to expect one's future boyfriend to shower us with gifts? That said, I plan to be a very egalitarian girlfriend. I don't mind if we split the bill on all our dates."

"Inaban! I told you to quit slipping in little comments like that! It's not fair! By the way, I'll do the same thing she said plus I'll also cook for you and stuff."

"If anything's 'not fair,' it's *your* little 'plus' just now!
Don't copy me just to make yourself look better!"

"L-Look... It was my fault for failing to pick up any souvenirs, so..."

"So...?" the girls asked in unison, whipping their heads in his direction, eyes agleam.

"...I'll get you some sort of gift sometime soon."

The two girls turned and high-fived each other.

"You guys weren't intentionally setting me up to say that, were you...?" Taichi mumbled to himself. The fact of the matter was, he couldn't prove they *weren't*... and that was the most frightening part.

Just then—

"Yui!" Aoki called out.

All at once, the cheer in the room evaporated. Silence fell.

Kiryama was leaning against the cold concrete wall, looking out of place.

Then Nagase and Inaba sighed, and Taichi realized they must have been purposely trying to delay the Aoki-Kiryama conversation as long as possible.

Inaba sighed a second time, then cut in, "Can it wait until after today's Regression, at least? Once the phenomenon kicks in, some of us may not be around to help—"

"I need to say it now. Please."

Inaba shook her head in exasperation. "Fine, fine. Want us to step outside?"

"No, that's okay. It's too cold out there."

Aoki walked over to Kiryama, then came to a stop a few meters away. She didn't turn to look at him; instead, she kept her eyes firmly on the floor, her head turned in Taichi's direction.

As for Nagase and Inaba, they quietly moved out of the way so they wouldn't interrupt.

"The first time I realized just how much you look like Nishino Nana, I was totally blown away. Obviously you reminded me of her from the start, but after a while I stopped thinking about it, y'know?"

Kiryama didn't respond.

"I don't care too much about the past. I only pay attention to the way I feel here in the present. That's why I don't think too hard about a lot of stuff," Aoki continued. "And when I remembered the way I used to feel in the past... it kinda freaked me out. So I tried to tell myself that I love you, not

her. That I didn't know what love was back then, so it didn't count. But... it didn't feel right." He looked up at empty air for a moment, almost searching for something. "So then I decided I needed to figure out how I really felt... and to do that, I needed to go see Nana. So... I did."

Kiriyma swallowed.

"That's when I realized—I really *did* love her. It *did* count. And I was wrong to try to pretend otherwise."

"I see," she responded for the first time, keeping her voice controlled.

"After all, I was just... being myself. Following my heart."

After taking a deep, introspective look at his own feelings, this was his conclusion.

"And that hasn't changed. I'm still just as true to myself—maybe even more so, actually."

Kiriyma raised her head slightly.

"So I won't try to discount the way I feel now. I'm gonna love myself for who I am at every point in my life. No shame. No regrets. I'm gonna be proud of my life, even the bad parts or the stuff I wish I could forget. After all, I was just being myself... and now those memories are all I have left."

Taichi couldn't begin to imagine the courage it must have taken for Aoki to make the decision to be proud of his whole life unconditionally... nor the events that had led him to this decision in the first place.

"Gutless"? Aoki was *anything but*. It was obvious he took his life way more seriously than the rest of them.

"I used to be in love with Nishino Nana. But now I'm in love with Kiriyma Yui. And what's wrong with that?" Aoki declared—boldly, directly, without hesitation.

Taichi was so overwhelmed, he forgot to breathe.

Then Kiriyma looked up at Aoki. "Meaning?"

"What I'm tryin' to say is... I, Aoki Yoshifumi, love you, Kiriyma Yui."

Kiriyma froze wordlessly for a moment. For a few seconds she stood perfectly still, like a statue. Then she looked back

at the floor.

“But... that’s just because I look like Nishino-san...”

“Nope. Not at all. Nana’s her own person, and so are you. Maybe I wasn’t sure before, but I promise you, I’m one-hundred percent confident now.” As she stared down at the ground, he continued, “I mean, yeah, admittedly you do *look* like her. And maybe you guys have similar personalities in some regards. But all that really means is... I have a type, and you both fit it.” He shot her a lighthearted grin. “That reminds me... I’ve always preferred girls with long hair, and when I mentioned that to Nana, she started growing hers out...”

Here he was, cheerfully recounting a story about an old flame to his current crush as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

“Not that I fall for people based entirely on looks, anyways.”

“What do you base it on, then? Personality?” Kiriyama asked, her voice a faint whisper.

“Mmm... No, that’s not quite it, either... How do I describe it? It’s like... I fall in love with the whole person?” He swayed back and forth, but his tone was firm.

“The whole person?”

“Yeah, like... I fell in love with Nishino Nana as a person... and now I’ve fallen for a different person named Kiriyama Yui.”

“Why...? What good am I? What value do I have to offer anyone...?” she asked in a watery voice that suggested the floodgates were threatening to burst open at any moment.

“To me, in this moment, you’re more valuable than anyone else in the world.”

Speaking logically, no one could claim to be more valuable than any other person in the entire world. But Aoki wasn’t speaking logically. He didn’t *need* logic.

“I’ll say it again: I’m in love with you.” With that, he fell silent. He didn’t feel the need to ask her to change.

Evidently he had chosen to leave it up to her.

The silence was broken only by the sound of sniffling. Aoki had overpowered the room—the cold, the darkness, the smell of decay, all of it overwritten by his love.

As for Kiriyama, the recipient of said love, Taichi couldn't imagine how she must have felt.

"...thetic... Totally p..." she muttered inaudibly, rubbing her eyes.

"Huh? Sorry, what'd you s—"

"Pathetic! *Pathetic!* PATHETIC! PATHETIC!" All of a sudden, she slammed her tear-stained hands into the wall, and for a moment Taichi worried the whole building might collapse. Eyes red, jaw clenched, she took a deep breath and roared—

"*THIS IS ALL SO PATHETIC!*"

"Y-Yui?!"

"...Honestly... I knew all along."

This time her voice was the sea after a storm—quiet, yet oppressive. It was clear that Aoki had driven her into a corner.

"And I knew I needed to confront it... but I kept hesitating... You didn't push me for an answer, so I just kept waiting for the 'right time'..." She balled her hands into fists. "I kept telling myself I wanted to take the next step, but that was total BS. And everyone around me told me I could just take my time, so that's what I did. I told myself it would all work itself out someday... but 'someday' conveniently never came." She lowered her head, and her hair fell in front of her eyes as she continued her monologue. "I know I'm the biggest, most pathetic loser out of all of us. That much is super obvious. I never try to put in the effort to confront my problems... I just keep running away like a coward..." She paused, sniffling. "The truth is, I just never wanted to admit it. I couldn't. And with each passing day, it got harder and harder... because I knew... the second I admitted it... it'd be proof that *I wasted two years of my life for nothing!*"

At last the dam burst, and tears streamed down her

cheeks. Something inside her had finally given way.

"It hurts so much... It hurts... It hurts! IT HURTS! /T HURTS!" she screamed, hair disheveled.

"Wh-What hurts? Are you okay, Yui?" Aoki asked.

Unfortunately, his question fell on deaf ears.

"But you know what?! *I DON'T GET TO USE THAT AS AN EXCUSE!*"

There was no stopping her now. This was her moment to confess... to repent.

"Oh, I'm afraid of men? *So what?*! Why did I let that keep me from my karate training?! Couldn't I have just explained it to them?! I'm sure they would've made special arrangements for me if I'd just asked... *so why didn't I ask?*! Was I afraid of word getting out? Did I want to forget it ever happened? God, why was I such a baby?! I could've tried to look for a girls-only dojo! So why didn't I think to try?!"

She wasn't talking to them. She was speaking directly to her past self—a version of her that would never return.

"No, actually... That's just another excuse, isn't it?! I mean, sure, that was part of it, but there was definitely more to it. Deep down I always felt it, but... lately I've made the connection..."

Perhaps the Regression had helped her put the pieces together—by physically sending her back to that era of her life.

"I told myself I could never win against a man... and I resented them for being able to overpower me without even trying... and from there I started looking down on the entire concept of putting in effort, didn't I?!"

For once, Kiriyama was confronting everything about herself without trying to skirt around the unpleasant parts—just as Aoki had.

"I don't know for sure if I'm right. All I know is that I kept running away from it! And I never once tried to fight back!" She gasped for breath, shoulders shaking, as if this rant had used up all her energy—and yet she kept on scraping the

bottom of the barrel to yell some more. “So what if I have androphobia?! So what if I start shaking like a leaf anytime a guy gets too close?! So what if I’m physically repulsed by their touch?! Couldn’t I have found a solution?! Why did I give up before I ever tried?!”

She screamed as if she were carving the words into her very soul. Though at first glance it may have seemed like any other tantrum, this was clearly an important moment for her.

“If I was so desperate to find a reason—*any reason*—to quit... then it was never a reason at all, was it?! It was just an *excuse*!”

She had a point. Valid justification was not reason enough to give up entirely.

“My androphobia is no excuse! It’s just that—a phobia! It doesn’t make my body shut down! I still get the choice to fight it if I want to! I just never chose to do anything but run away!”

Indeed—excluding the presence of the Liberation phenomenon, she was always in charge of her own actions. She always had a choice. And that choice was hers to make.

“I never tried to confront it! I never tried to take the next step! THE PROBLEM WAS ALWAYS ME!” she howled up at the dull gray ceiling. Then she fell to her knees and sat there, unmoving, as though the well had finally run dry. She looked visibly exhausted—but there was nothing the others could do for her.

More accurately, they didn’t think it necessary to do anything. They had witnessed the burning passion of a girl who had broken out of her shell, torn down her walls, and lay bare her vulnerabilities for all the world to see.

“When did I stop caring?” she scoffed quietly. “Back then I always hated losing... so what happened? When did I start just... *shrugging my shoulders* anytime I failed?” She looked up and tilted her head in contemplation. “Like, why would I ask *someone else* what my value is? I’m the one who

decides that. If I don't want to be an NPC... then all I have to do is steal the spotlight." She pushed herself back onto her feet. "In the past I used to be able to move forward on my own... so when did I start using everyone around me as a crutch?!"

Kiriyama stomped her foot, hands clenched into fists, a fire burning in her eyes. She paused to take a few deep breaths, then wiped her tears and looked around at the others. Her expression was one of firm resolve.

"I'm done running. I'm done dragging my feet. And I'm done being coddled. I'm gonna fight my own battles. I'm gonna move on," she declared. "And I'm gonna get stronger."

With that, she walked right up to Aoki and looked up at him.

She had made her choice.

"I'm really sorry for the way I've been acting all this time. You never pushed me too hard, so I used that as an excuse to take my sweet time. And... I'm sorry for all the other stuff, too... All the things I put you through... all the stuff I said... and most of all, I'm sorry for throwing this stupid tantrum."

"C'mon. You know you don't gotta apologize for all that."

"Yeah... you're right." Kiriyama smiled softly—a warm, bright, beautiful smile. "Thank you, Aoki. Really. By being so open with me, you've given me the strength to move forward."

Aoki glanced away, scratching his head. "Aw, shucks... You're makin' me blush..."

Then Kiriyama brightened up suddenly. "Say... How would you feel if I hugged you?"

"Wha?! Dude, I'd be stoked, obviously! Who wouldn't wanna hug their favorite gi—"

The next moment, Kiriyama wrapped her arms tightly around Aoki's midsection. Kiriyama, as in the girl who suffered from androphobia. The girl who trembled when any guy got too close... who felt physically sick at their touch.

Then her body began to shake—hard. Practically one step below a full-on seizure. Regardless, she buried her face in Aoki's chest.



Nagase began to approach them, mildly apprehensive. "Yui... You don't have to—"

But Inaba grabbed her shoulder. "Stop."

As for Aoki, he was frozen in place like a statue, his arms sticking out at weird angles. Evidently he was so startled, he'd forgotten how to speak.

Then Kiriyama's violent shaking began to subside, little by little. Occasionally she would twitch like she'd been zapped with electricity, but over time that too began to fade... Then, suddenly, the violent shaking picked up again—but Kiriyama refused to let go. She turned her head to the side, almost like she was coming up for air, and Taichi could see a waterfall of sweat streaming down her face as she clenched her jaw in fear.

Then the shaking grew softer once more.

Little by little... little by little...

And then, finally... it stopped.

Kiriyama let go of Aoki—and punched him lightly in the chest. Overwhelmed, he collapsed on the spot.

"I won." She grinned impishly, sweat still pouring down her face. "See? I can do it if I try. I can do it."

"She... She did it...?" Nagase whispered, stunned.

"I won't lose to anyone—or anything—ever again."

Kiriyama put her hands on her hips and flipped her long, shiny, chestnut-colored hair over her shoulder, and in that moment, she radiated pure strength.

Taichi couldn't believe how much she had changed... No, she hadn't changed. She was always this way. She had simply gone back.

She laughed. "Weird... This feels so familiar... Almost like I'm a kid again... Like I've gone back to the days where I thought I was unstoppable..." With a prideful smile on her face, she began to practice her lightning-fast karate punches. "You know, Buddha has this famous saying: '*Tenjou tenge yuiga dokuson*'. Throughout heaven and earth, I singularly am worthy of honor. "It's got my name in it, you

know?” Her tone was lighthearted, but still serious.

“Yui...” Inaba sighed. “You do realize that saying doesn’t actually mean ‘I’m number one’ or anything like that, right?”

A few seconds of silence ticked by as Kiriyama’s face flushed bright red. *Classic*.

“Wh-Whatever!” she shouted, flailing her arms dismissively. “The point is, I’m, like, gonna kick ass someday! End of story!”

At the end of the day, she was still the Kiriyama they all knew and loved.

“You? Kick ass? You sure about that?” Inaba asked, her tone playfully mean, and Taichi realized she must’ve no longer felt the need to handle Kiriyama with kid gloves.

“I... I’ll do my best!”

“You sure putting in all that effort will make a difference?”

“Well... maybe not...” Kiriyama replied in a small voice, and for a moment Inaba seemed to regret what she’d said—“...but I gotta believe in myself regardless, you know?”

At this, Inaba burst out laughing. “Gahahaha! You and Mr. Mentally Checked Out over there! You’re both so goddamn stupid... I love it!”

“Wh... Who’re you calling stupid?! Don’t compare me to *him*!”

“It’s true, though. You’re both stupid... but you’re not really *stupid*, you follow me? If anything, I’m the one who’s really stupid.”

“Um... Wh-What does that mean...?”

“Don’t worry about it, stupid.”

“Enough with all the ‘stupid’ this and ‘stupid’ that! Takes one to know one—Mmgghh?!”

Out of nowhere, Nagase flung herself onto Kiriyama in a tackle-hug. “You rock, Yui! You’re so badass! And such a cutie, too! A badass cutie!”

“A badass cutie... You mean it? That’s, like, totally my ideal aesthetic!” Giddy with delight, the two girls fell into some sort of strange dance routine.

While that was happening, Taichi took his phone out and checked the time—

“Guys! It’s almost noon!”

A split-second later—

“Nngah!” One moment Aoki was absently staring into space, and the next moment he’d shrunk into a small boy.

“Whoa... My clothes are all baggy!”

Evidently today’s Regression affected only him.

Kiriyama pulled away from Nagase. “Come here and I’ll get you a change of clothes. By the way...” She bent down to his eye level. “How old are you, Yoshifumi-kun?”

“I’m ten.” Coincidentally, that was the same age at which Aoki had first mistaken Kiriyama for a different person, during his first Regression.

“Ten, huh? Well... It might be a bit too much to ask right now, but... I’m gonna work hard so that someday, no matter who else I happen to look like, you’ll recognize me as the one and only Kiriyama Yui,” she declared. Her smile was gentle, and yet it carried a hint of defiance.

Aoki [age 10] tilted his head, puzzled. “Whaddya mean? Of course you’re Kiriyama Yui-san. Who else could you be?” he asked as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

For a moment, this innocent statement left everyone wordless.

“Huh? Wait, but... don’t you think I look like Nishino Nana’s older sister or something?” Kiriyama asked, confused.

“Uhhh... I mean, sure, you *do* look like Nana... but so what? You’re your own person, Kiriyama-san.”

“Oh... Right. Of course. You’re right... I’m my own person, and so is everybody else,” Kiriyama nodded.

“Yup! And there’s no replacing any of us, y’know?”

“Hahaha... For sure... Haha...”

“What’re you laughin’ about?”

“Oh, nothing. Haha... It’s, like, just so totally obvious to me now... Hahaha! I can’t believe I needed a kid like you to

point it out to me!"

Some things were obvious on an almost instinctual level, and yet at times people could lose sight of them regardless.

And so Kiriyama picked out a new outfit for him, giggling to herself all the while, though he still seemed confused as to why she was laughing in the first place.

His resolve had changed her... and now the two of them were moving forward at breakneck speeds.

Indeed, that was the moment Taichi realized—at the end of the day, it was the strength of their bonds that gave them all the power to make it through.



The mood in the room was peaceful as Kiriyama and Aoki [age 10] continued to chat amiably.

"Why did he recognize her this time...? Did his encounter with Nishino Nana refresh his memory or something? Or... No, never mind. It doesn't matter," Inaba muttered to Taichi. She sighed, then continued, "How long is this stupid Regression going to last, anyway? It's January 3rd, and «Heartseed» *still* hasn't turned up! What are we going to do if it sticks around into the new semester?"

She looked so anxious, Taichi couldn't help but want to soothe her worries. "It'll be okay, Inaba. I'm sure it'll end soon," he declared firmly.

But this would quickly prove to be his downfall. Inaba's eyes narrowed. "How can you be so sure of that?"

"...Huh? I'm not... I'm just, y-you know, trying to look on the bright side..." he deflected. He couldn't let her find out about «The Second», lest he break their agreement.

"Oh really? Now I'm convinced." She grinned like a hunter closing in on her prey. The suspicion on her face had transformed into certainty. "You're hiding something, aren't you?"

"What's going on, guys? Why's it so tense all of a sudden?

Just chill!"

"Butt out, Iori. Now admit it, Taichi. I've always wondered why *you* were the only exception from the Regression. It would make sense if you had some other important role to play."

Oh god, I'm dead.

"And that look on your face tells me I'm right."

"W-Well..."

"Hold on... Taichi, what's going on?" Nagase asked hesitantly.

He only had one answer left to him. "I... can't tell you."

"What do you mean, you can't tell us?" Inaba demanded.

"If I tell you... supposedly things will get worse." That was the threat «The Second» had made when it first decided to sub in for «Heartseed».

"What do you mean, worse?"

"Like I said, I can't tell you."

"Sure you can. Any information you have will only make us stronger. You know that."

And so Taichi caved.

"—and that's all I know. Great, I just blabbed everything..." Taichi slumped his shoulders.

"Aww, don't feel down, Taichi," Kiriyama consoled him.

"Unbelievable..." Inaba grimaced as Nagase stood beside her, mouth agape. "I'm starting to think it was a mistake to force it all out of you. Then again, it's not like they watch us 24/7—"

"What a shame..."

Suddenly, a lethargic voice echoed through the room. The voice belonged to Nagase Iori—but the speaker was someone else entirely. Someone borrowing her body.

"Who are you?" asked Inaba.

"Who...? It no longer matters. This is goodbye." [She] spoke slowly, with a sleepy expression on [her face]. Then [Nagase]—no, «The Second»—turned to Taichi. "I said it

would get worse... I said I would change it to 'all hours.' Remember?" [Her eyes] glinted darkly, freezing him in place. "Was it a mistake to choose you...? I could have chosen anyone... Oh well. It ends now." It looked away as though it had lost interest in him entirely. "Now that the secret is out, this will be an entertaining way to end things... Oh well... Goodbye."

With that, Nagase's head slumped forward—and the next moment, she jerked herself upright again. "...Huh? What just happened? Or did I imagine it?"

"Goddamnit! That's it?! At least «Heartseed» had the decency to talk it out with us first!" Inaba spat.

At the same time, something clattered loudly to the floor.

It was the handheld game console Aoki [age 10] had been holding. He'd been sitting a short distance away playing video games, but now he was curled up in the fetal position. "Nngghh...!"

Instantly, Kiriyama rushed over. "Y-Yoshifumi-kun?! What's wrong?! It's nowhere near five o'clock—"

And yet the next instant, Aoki transformed back to his usual self.

"Aagghh! Clothes... too... tight...!" Aoki choked as he flailed around.

"Wh... What the?!" Kiriyama froze in her tracks.

"What's going on? Is it really over? That was abrupt..." Inaba mused, her tone a strange mixture of relief and disappointment.

Taichi felt the tension drain from his body.

Thank god.

For a minute there he was worried what «The Second» might do... but evidently it just decided to end things for good.

If I'd known this would happen, I would've blabbed a lot sooner—

That was when he felt his body begin to grow hot. Painfully hot, as if every last molecule was combusting

inside him. His mind was a searing blur. Clutching his chest, he doubled over.

In the distance he could hear voices.

“Taichi?! What’s wrong?!”

That was Nagase.

“What’s the matter with him? It’s almost like he’s about to Regress or something... Wait... Oh god... Did it change the Regression so it can affect anyone at any time?!”

Inaba’s voice was the last thing he heard before his consciousness faded.

There, in the darkness of the void, he felt strangely wistful for days long past.

+ + +

I need to go home, ASAP.

I can’t leave Mom alone with him. It’s not safe.

I need to be there.

I need to get it right this time...

Maybe then I can change the past for real.

Chapter 8: Second Chances

When he awoke, he could feel the last lingering traces of a fever. His mind was a kaleidoscope of memories—old, forgotten memories of a bygone chapter in his life.

“...Huh...? Whoa!” He looked down to find he was dressed in kids’ clothes. Clothes that were now skin-tight.

“How do you feel?” Nagase asked, her brows furrowed with worry.

“I’m alright... I think...”

“Here. Get changed.” She handed him the outfit he’d previously been wearing, folded neatly into a stack.

“What’s our current situation look like?” he asked.

At this, she looked away and shook her head. He looked out the window to find it was pitch-black outside.

After a brief rundown of what had happened while Taichi was Regressed, Inaba pressed both hands to the table and bowed her head. “God, I really fucked up... I won’t ask you to forgive me, but at least let me express regret for my actions... I’m so sorry, everyone.”

“C’mom. No need to beat yourself up over it—that’s *my* job. After all, if anyone’s to blame here, it’s me,” said Taichi.

As of tonight, the members of the CRC were now subject to completely random bouts of Regression that struck at any given moment and lasted a variable length of time. And this time it affected Taichi, too.

“So during the five-plus hours I was [twelve years old], everyone minus Nagase Regressed once each...?” he mused absently.

“Correct,” Inaba muttered darkly. Her gaze was fixed on Kiriyama [age 9] and Aoki [age 7], both bundled up in

blankets and playing video games.

It was now past 7:00 PM.

"I am hungryyy, oh so hungryyy..." Kiriyama [age 9] sang to herself.

"Hey! No standing on chairs! That's not safe! ...Impressive sense of balance, though!"

"Join me, Taichi-san! Let's compete to see who can spin in circles the most!"

"*That's even less safe!* Come on, now!" He picked her up off the chair and set her back down on the ground.

"Awww... You're no fun..."

"Taichi! What are you doing? Hurry it up!" At Inaba's summons, he walked over to where she and Aoki stood, and she clapped them both on the shoulder. "Taichi... Aoki... We're counting on you."

"You got it."

"Roger that, Captain Inaba!"

Their mission: to bring back enough food to last them for at least a few days.

"Try to make it quick. But on the off chance one of you Regresses, contact me immediately. Then get your asses back here as fast as possible."

Now that there was a reasonable chance any one of them could transform into children on the spot, it was no longer safe to wander around outside on a whim. After all, this physical change was something even strangers could see, plain as day.

That said, they couldn't very well go without food or water.

"Be sure to make a pit stop at a porta-potty or something while you're out. I'd like to reduce outside excursions as much as possible."

"Why not just use the bathroom at the corner store?" Aoki asked.

"Seeing as we don't know when it might strike, we're

better off avoiding human contact as much as possible.”

“Will do!”

The two of them had been chosen for grocery duty for one critical reason: they had Regressed most recently out of everyone. Thus, it was likely they wouldn’t be struck again for some amount of time.

Key word being *likely*, of course.

“Alright, we’ll be back later.”

“Safe travels... Come back soon,” said Nagase.

Her exhaustion was worryingly apparent.

It wasn’t until well after 9:00 PM that they finally reached a point where none of the five were Regressed. (Nagase had Regressed to [age 13] for just an hour and a half while the boys were out grocery shopping, which meant all of them had now officially Regressed once each following «The Second»’s rule change.)

“How’d it go?” Inaba asked the others. “Seems like my family’s okay with it, at least for tonight.”

They had all called their families to deliver the following message: *Something’s come up and I won’t make it home tonight. It’s possible I won’t be home for a while.*

While Regressed, they would lose control of their bodies and generally be incapable of consciously keeping themselves concealed. Thus, the only option left to them was to stay away entirely.

“Yeah, my folks are cool with it,” said Aoki.

“My family is... *tentatively* okay with it... but they’re pissed,” Taichi chimed in. “Even my mom got mad, and she normally doesn’t care at all.”

(In particular, his sister Rina told him that she hated him and consequently had decided to pretend he didn’t exist. Taichi wasn’t sure he’d be able to win her back, considering his wallet was practically growing cobwebs at this point.)

“My family’s... pretty pissed, yeah...” Kiriyama put her head in her hands. “Like, they were already worried enough

with the amount I've been gone lately, and this is kinda the final straw."

Taichi thought back to his past encounters with Kiriyama's mom and her warm smile.

"Not only that, but like... my sister could blow our cover at any minute. Obviously I've told her we're fine and convinced her to keep quiet, but who knows how long it'll last..."

Not even their hideout was safe.

"What about you?" Taichi asked Nagase, who was staring blankly down at the table. At his question, she looked up sharply.

"Huh?! Oh... Yeah, it's all good. Everything's just peachy... but, uh..."

"But what? Tell us what's on your mind," Inaba pressed.

"Umm... Could I... maybe go home for a bit? Just for like, two minutes! It won't take two seconds, honest!" she blurted desperately.

"Absolutely not, dumbass. If I let you do that, I'll have to let everyone else do it too, and at that point we're as good as busted."

If society at large found out about the supernatural events of their lives, well... there were a few different possible outcomes. Maybe it would end as little more than a rumor. Or maybe anyone who tried to report what they'd seen would simply be thrown in a mental ward. Or maybe... the five of them would be carted off and confined to some sort of lab for analysis.

But the worst possibility of all... was that «Heartseed»—or «The Second», or someone else entirely—would erase everything.

After all, these beings had implicitly conducted similar experiments elsewhere. And though they were at the height of the Information Age, as of yet no such otherworldly phenomena had ever been reported to the public at large. According to Inaba, this suggested «Heartseed» and his ilk had some method of keeping things under wraps.

Specifically, she had three pet theories: erasing their memories, erasing history, or both. None of them could be disproven. After all, these entities were essentially omnipotent.

"Yeah... I had a feeling you'd say no... Sorry. Forget I asked."

She looked so utterly defeated, a gust of wind could knock her over.

As the night wore on, the room grew much, much colder. Inaba [age 3] lay near the heater, wrapped in multiple blankets to keep her from getting sick.

"Is she finally asleep? Thank god... Staying up late must be hard when you're three," Kiriyama whispered.

"Alright. In the meantime, let's get some fresh air in here." Aoki walked off to open the windows. After all, with a kerosene heater on full blast, they needed to keep the room safely ventilated.

"I guess it's not safe to keep the heater on while we're all asleep..." Taichi muttered to himself as he contemplated potential workarounds. They could each take turns staying up to keep watch... but they couldn't escape the possibility that the person on duty might Regress during their shift.

"Uggghhh... Like, who cares about the heater? I wanna take a shower *sooo* bad... I can literally feel the sweat and grime..." Kiriyama complained under her breath, taking care not to wake Inaba [age 3].

"Me too... but since we don't have a choice, all we can do is tolerate it."

Considering her age, Nagase [age 11] was surprisingly sensible.

His mind stirred awake, hazy and heavy.

He hadn't meant to fall asleep; he'd intended to stay awake as long as possible, just in case.

His back ached. Somewhere, he could hear the rustling

sounds of someone moving around.

Rubbing his blurry eyes, Taichi sat up. The lamp had been left on overnight, and its light now blinded him in the darkness.

There, across the room on the farthest fringes of the lamp's incandescent glow, he could make out a lone shadow.

Her skin was so porcelain-pale, it glowed in the light. The sloping curve of her shoulders tickled his aesthetic instincts, and he found himself almost wanting to touch them.

As his gaze slowly descended, her supple skin seemed to go on forever, interrupted only by a single band of fabric in the middle—

“Huh?”

Of course, he reacted in surprise. Audibly.

“Wha?!” Nagase whipped around, wearing only a bra from the waist up. “Nngah?! Taichi?!” She snatched a nearby sweater and held it up to hide her modesty.

Taichi hastily turned in the opposite direction. “I... I wasn’t looking, okay?! I didn’t see anything!”

As he listened to the rustle of clothes behind him, it occurred to him that “I didn’t see anything” was exactly the sort of thing a guy would say if he *had* seen something, because a guy who genuinely hadn’t seen anything wouldn’t realize what the problem was in the first place...

“O-Okay. You can look now.”

Now that Nagase had given the all-clear, he turned back in her direction. “Did you transform back just now or something?”

“Yeah. Sorry for waking you,” she said as she folded up the kid-sized clothes she’d been wearing earlier. “How old was I?”

“You were [eleven].”

“Hmm... What was I like?” she asked, her voice perfectly casual as she straightened out a stray wrinkle.

Taichi fumbled for an answer. “You seemed to be really smart and... mature for your age,” he replied finally, hoping

it was what she wanted to hear.

“So that’s how you saw me, huh... Smart and mature...”

Are you trying to say you aren’t?

“...Anyway, change of topic—Yui and Aoki were really something else today, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s for sure.”

Indeed, “something else” was perhaps the only way to describe it.

“It was just... incredible, y’know? Me, I don’t think I could ever pull that off.”

“Yeah, same...”

The raw power he felt surging from the two of them in that moment... He didn’t stand a chance of replicating it.

“Really? You too?”

“Why do you sound so incredulous? I’m nobody special, you know.”

“Sure you are,” she replied without smiling.

“What? No, I’m really not... I’m useless without the rest of you guys.”

He watched as the cheer drained from her expression. Then it hit him: Why would their friends’ bravery make them feel bad about themselves? Surely they were meant to feel empowered, if anything.

“But—” he blurted out, hesitated, then continued, “—umm... well... I don’t *have* to accomplish everything on my own, obviously! All I have to do is reach out, and together we can do some amazing things... Take Aoki and Kiriyma for example! I feel like they couldn’t have done it without each other, you know?”

Somehow that came out sounding relatively articulate.

Whew.

“Reach out, huh...” Nagase murmured to herself, looking away.

“So—”

“Jeez, what are we doing? It’s bedtime!” she interrupted, hopping to her feet. “Let’s get some sleep while we can!

Brrr... I miss my warm blanket!"

She smiled weakly—and to Taichi, that air of fragility made it all the more beautiful.

Then she headed back to her makeshift "bed" and dove under the covers.

With the lamp relocated to prevent its light from showing through the windows, the room felt cold and dark. Around him lay Nagase, Kiriyama, Aoki, and Inaba [age 3], each of them curled up in a ball to stay as warm as possible. To him, the sight was heartbreakingly.

Suddenly, it felt like the shadowy corners of the room were threatening to swallow them whole.

How would they survive this if they couldn't even go home to their families? Would they ever be free to walk around outside again? Their food supply would last them through tomorrow at best—but what about the next day? They only had a limited amount of money on hand, and they would have to buy more kerosene for the heater eventually. Where would they shower or get clean underwear? And what if they were forced to abandon their hideout? Where would they stay?

How would they explain it to their families?

What would happen once the new semester started up? Would they leave town? If so, where would they go? How could they survive?

Taichi didn't have a clear answer. And worst of all—it was his fault they were all suffering.

He'd taken everything too lightly. Way too lightly. Why couldn't he have just kept his promise to «The Second»? Was it because he couldn't stand up to Inaba? Was it because «The Second» had suggested it was all going to end soon anyway?

None of these were anything more than crappy excuses—and he didn't have the right to make excuses. After all, he never once thought to actually make an effort to keep his word. He never made a decision one way or the other.

Instead, he basically left it up to fate, ignoring the fact that this time around, the part he played was in fact a crucial one.

All this time, had he ever taken it seriously? Ever stopped to think critically about his actions? Or had he simply shrugged his shoulders from day one?

He didn't have the right to lament their current situation when he never lifted a finger to try to prevent it. He'd been afraid of the responsibility, so instead he'd hid behind his own powerlessness.

For a guy who loved to go around sticking his nose into other people's business, he sure was good at running away from his own problems. *Pathetic*.

He hated to think how much better this might have worked out if «The Second» had chosen someone else instead.

But there was no use crying over spilled milk. It was all in the past, and there was no going back.

After making sure Inaba [age 3] was bundled up nice and tight, Taichi crawled back into bed.

Sadly, not even multiple layers of blankets could shut out the chill of the hard concrete.

Another day of spontaneous transformations came and went. This was now their second night under the new, totally randomized Regression.

“I told you, one of my rich friends is taking me to hang out at their vacation home... Huh? L-Let you talk to them? What’s that? Sorry, you’re breaking up—Hold on, we’re going through a tunnel—” With that, Kiriyama promptly hung up, then turned her phone off completely. The look on her face was one of crushing despair. “This is *totally* not good, you guys. They’re about ready to file a missing persons report or something...”

“I gotta say, that was one hell of a lie just now,” Taichi remarked. Not that he’d been any more honest with his own

family, of course.

The air between them was cold and dismal. Currently they were keeping the heater off in order to save fuel.

At the same time, Taichi's stomach was rumbling loudly. *Man, if only I could just stop being hungry...* He ran a hand through his greasy hair.

Everyone in the room looked utterly miserable. They were slowly being pushed to their absolute limits, both physically and mentally. Honestly, they probably should've broken down completely by now... and yet they were still holding on. As long as they had each other, they could endure it.

But how long would that last?

"Seeing as none of us are Regressed at the moment, let's go ahead and pick up our discussion where we left off earlier," Inaba called, though she was audibly fatigued and her voice wasn't as strong as usual. "First, regarding the suggestion to go to someone for help—I really, *really* don't want to drag anyone else into this, so I'd like to avoid that option until it's our very last resort."

The others nodded in unison.

"I'm sorry, guys..." Taichi grimaced.

"For the last time, enough with the apologies, dumbass! ...Anyway, as it stands, it seems we don't have a permanent solution available to us... so for the time being, let's stock up on enough food to last us through tomorrow."

"Just tomorrow, Inabacchan? Shouldn't we try to get as much as we can?" Aoki asked. He'd been his usual chipper self earlier that morning, but now that energy was gone.

"I mean, you're not wrong. Limiting the total number of public excursions would reduce risk considerably, and that's a good thing. However... with our current situation as unstable as it is, I'd like us to keep as much money as we can on hand for emergencies."

"You mean, like, if someone got sick and needed medicine?" Kiriyama asked.

"Precisely."

Their lives were now hanging in the balance.

“Okay, so—”

Nagase stopped herself, and whipped out her cell phone. “Ack! Sorry! Gotta take this!” she interrupted as she put the phone to her ear and meandered over to the other side of the room. “Hello? ...Huh? Y-Yeah...? Wait, *what*?!” She froze in her tracks.

Taichi had a bad feeling about this.

“Mom, slow down! What’s going on?!?” she yelled. “No, wait—Mom—!”

She pulled the phone away from her ear to check the screen, and started tapping furiously. Numerous callback attempts were made, but none were successful.

Eyes red with tears, she began to tremble. “What do I do now...?”

Hesitantly, Nagase began to explain what had happened over the course of winter break.

One day, out of the blue, the Nagase family got a knock on the door. It was Nagase’s first-ever stepfather—the man she herself had once described to Taichi as “the violent type.” (Kiriyama and Aoki hadn’t heard all the details about her family situation until now, so they were rather taken aback by this.)

Though this man had at one time been part of their family, it had been many years, and three other “fathers” had come and gone since they last saw him. There had been no contact between them, either—Nagase didn’t even know his phone number.

And yet, for some reason, there he was on their doorstep.

“Seeing as he used to be family and all, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to invite him inside,” she explained.

Then one thing led to another, and his “visit” turned into an extended stay.

“At first he would help out around the house, and I thought maybe he was serious about giving this another

shot... but then, over time, he stopped helping... and then it became 'I need money for booze'..."

And as the days wore on, the demands didn't stop there. He hadn't gone so far as to hit her or her mother, but whenever he got drunk, he would start throwing things.

Instantly, Taichi's sight warped. Nagase was suffering. How had he failed to see it? Wasn't that his job? Wasn't he spared from the Regression *specifically* so he could be there to help keep them all safe?

"Sounds like a textbook 'deadbeat dad' stereotype... Just throw him out on his ass!" Inaba growled.

"Well... I thought maybe I could do it right this time," Nagase replied. "I just kept thinking, y'know... maybe if I'd been better at making things work... maybe if I'd made better choices back then... maybe things could've been different."

Any given human life was inevitably built on a series of irrevocable choices... but what if that wasn't always the case? What if they had the opportunity to go back and try again?

"But in the end... it looks like I messed up all over again... and now my mom's telling me it's not safe to come home right now."

He couldn't begin to imagine how hard she must have tried to fix things.

"Do you think she's like... in danger?" Kiriyama asked hesitantly.

"I don't know... Maybe."

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" Inaba's tone was tinged with anger.

"Because it's my problem, and I need to deal with it."

"I mean, yes, but—"

"Sorry, one sec!" Nagase jumped to her feet, pulled out her phone, and turned away from them to answer it. "Hello?! Mom?!" Pause. "Oh..." Her voice took on a layer of ice. "Hi, Dad."

Evidently she was addressing him as “Dad” now.

“Uh-huh... Yeah... I mean, yes, sir... What?” Her tone shifted sharply into alarm. “Wait! You can’t! Dad—!”

She froze, her phone still pressed to her ear. Several seconds passed... and then she slowly flipped it shut once more.

Meanwhile, the room was dead silent. They could all tell that something serious had happened.

Nagase turned back to face them—on the verge of tears.

“What do I do...? What do I DO?!“ Clutching her hair, she collapsed to the ground. “I need to get back there ASAP or else... but what if I Regress on my way there?! Then I’ll just cause problems for the rest of you, and I don’t want that! *So what do I do?!*”

She was more panicked than the others had ever seen her. Naturally, they all reacted at once.

“Calm down, Nagase!”

“Relax, Iori.”

“It... It’ll be okay, Iori!”

“Hang in there, Iori-chan!”

But their voices didn’t reach her. She was too deep in her own head.

Taichi hurried over to her and put an arm around her shoulders. “Nagase!”

“What do I do...? I need to go... but I can’t... I can’t risk making things worse for everyone else! But I have to go! *What do I do?!*”

She was on the verge of a breakdown. Taichi felt panic creep up in his chest—but he pushed it back down. Right now he wanted to be there for her. He *needed* to be there for her.

He knew her mind was probably a jumbled mess at the moment, so he decided to keep things simple.

“Well, what do you *want* to do?”

They wouldn’t get anywhere unless she had an answer to that.

But Nagase simply shook her head. “I don’t know... I don’t know! I don’t know anything anymore!”

The next instant, Nagase slipped out of his embrace.

For a second he didn’t understand what had happened... and then he looked down to find a grade-school-age Nagase staring back up at him.

She had Regressed.

The little girl quietly got to her feet, rolled up her baggy sleeves, and headed for the door.

“Where do you think you’re going, missy?!” Kiriyama shrieked.

Mini-Nagase stopped and turned to look at her.

“I’m goin’ home.”

“What?! Why?!” Taichi exclaimed.

“I gotta be a good girl so my daddy won’t get mad. Keep Mama safe.”

Her little eyes shone like jewels, pure and untainted and full of light... as if she had been sent from heaven itself.

“And you feel the need to do this *why* exactly...?” Inaba asked.

“‘Cuz I love my mama.”

That was her entire reasoning. As far as she was concerned, she was going to follow her heart without hesitation.

Meanwhile, Taichi was blown away. Sometimes little kids had a way better grasp of what mattered most... and right now, she was putting the rest of them to shame.

“Nngh...!” With that, grade-school Nagase clutched at herself—and the next moment, she was back to normal.

“Huh...? Where... Wait, what? Did I Regress?” she asked, confusion on her face as she unrolled her sleeves. “Wait... How long was I in kid mode?”

“Not long at all. Like a minute, tops,” Taichi answered.

“Oh... That explains it... I... I remember...” she whispered. A tear rolled down her cheek. “Wait... Why am I crying?”

She laughed awkwardly and wiped her eyes. There, she

froze, her sleeves covering her face.

Then, after a long pause, she looked up again. This time, her expression was one of firm resolve.

“...I’m sorry, but I’m going home.”

Something about the way she looked in that moment was so incredibly beautiful, Taichi found himself rooted to the spot... that is, until she turned to leave.

He hurried over and grabbed her by the shoulder. “Wait, Nagase!”

“I know it’s stupid, but I just... I have to go. I’m sorry.”

“Iori...”

“Iori-chan...”

Evidently neither Kiriymama nor Aoki knew what to say, either.

“I care about you guys so, so much... and I don’t want to put you at risk just for my own selfish needs... but... this is important to me. I can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

Her words were painfully sincere; the tears in her eyes were proof enough of that.

They weren’t the only ones struggling. There was a whole world out there—a world full of people who mattered. People worth protecting.

“I won’t burden you with this, I promise. I’ll figure it all out myself.” She pushed Taichi’s hand away and walked off.

“Wait!”

But Taichi was powerless to stop her.

Supposedly, her former stepfather was living with them again. Allegedly, he was causing major problems in the Nagase household. And apparently, Nagase needed to go stop him—despite the potential threat of the Regression looming over her.

Everything was moving too fast. He didn’t know how to react. And unless he got his act together, she was going to leave without them—

“*HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, DUMBASS!*” Inaba bellowed, venom in her voice. “Who said you could run off on your

own?! Because I sure fucking didn't!" She ran over at full speed and blocked Nagase's path, her expression deadly serious.

More so than anyone else in the club, it was Inaba who always prioritized the needs of the group, carefully weighing all the risks to determine the best possible course of action. The question was, would she accept Nagase's decision?

"You fucked it up the first time around, didn't you?!" she shouted.

The intensity of Inaba's reaction had Nagase at a loss. "I... Yeah...?"

"And you're still agonizing over it to this day, aren't you?! But do you know *why* you fucked up?!"

Inaba was clawing her way into Nagase's old wounds without mercy.

"Wh... What do you mean, why...?" Nagase stammered, overwhelmed by the other girl's ferocity.

"Because you tried to handle it all by yourself without consulting anyone, nimrod! How the fuck do you not see that?!"

"I—"

"You always try to do everything yourself, don't you? And then when it doesn't work—because it *never* works—instead of asking us for help, you freak out and run off! You think that attitude is gonna solve this?! Is that what you think?!"

"Well... I still gotta try... No, that's not it... I have to make it work..."

"Will you fucking take a look around you for two seconds?! What are we, chopped liver?!"

Nagase glanced from Inaba to Taichi to Kiriyama to Aoki, her eyes redder than ever. "But... this is my personal problem... It's my family..."

"Enough al—"

"Enough already!"

For a moment, Taichi wasn't sure who had cut in—but then he realized it was none other than *himself*. He flinched

as everyone turned to look at him.

And yet somehow his mouth kept moving.

"I mean, yes, technically it's none of our business. And we don't have the right to dictate how you handle it or anything like that. But there comes a point when it *does* become our business, and that's when it starts destroying you." He cared about her too much to let her suffer. "Anyway, sorry for being a nag."

But Inaba clapped him on the shoulder. "Times like these, I don't think you ought to apologize." She shot him a smirk, and he got the vaguest sense that she approved of what he said.

"Remember what you said to me a while back? 'Why would you do something so stupid without talking to anyone? If you're that worried about it, then just tell us!' And you were right. None of us are mind-readers," Inaba muttered softly. "Maybe you didn't have anyone you could turn to back then... but right now, you have us. Don't forget that, alright?"

Some things were simply impossible to manage alone... but that's what friends were for.

"I'm here for you, Iori!" Kiriyma called out.

"You know I got your back, girl!" Aoki piped up.

"Same here. I'll always be on your side," Taichi added.

Inaba turned back to Nagase. "See? You've got friends you can turn to. Friends you can count on. Friends who *want* to help you. So what'll it be?"

What was the point of their friendship if they couldn't be there for her at her darkest hour?

"Guys... I..." Nagase stammered, her expression blank with shock, as if she wasn't quite sure how to react. Then, bit by bit, her face crumpled, and the tears came streaming down her cheeks as she began to bawl like a child half her age.

"Ultimately it's your call, of course! Far be it from me to stick my nose into other people's family business. Wouldn't

want to cross any boundaries," Inaba explained cheerfully.
"So, what's your plan?"

She made it sound like the most trivial question in the world... like it was really no big deal one way or the other.

Nagase sniffled and wiped her eyes, struggling to regain her composure, and Taichi found himself wondering just how long she'd been holding it all inside. That said, he was glad she was crying in joy rather than anguish.

"All this time... I told myself I needed to fix it on my own..." Nagase murmured in a watery voice, still staring at the floor.

Truth be told, Taichi didn't see anything wrong with that... but it was a personal choice she was by no means bound to.

"Because I was the one who screwed it up in the first place, I felt even more obligated to set things right without needing to rely on anyone... but then the Regression happened... and now there's so much going on... and I didn't want to add to it... so I..."

"You can just ask, Iori-chan."

"He's right, Iori. All it really takes is a few words."

Nagase was lost at sea, searching for an answer, and so Aoki and Kiriyma stepped forward to be her lighthouse in the dark. Somehow the two of them had managed to become an even more powerful team... likely as a result of everything that happened between them the day before.

With their encouragement, Nagase finally looked up—eyes damp and puffy, brows furrowed hard, trying her best not to fall apart again.

Then, at last, she said the four magic words that would turn her friends into her heroes.

"...Will you... help me...?"

Until now, she had always struggled to solve everything on her own... but now she was finally asking for help.

No one replied, of course—because it went without saying.

"Listen, Iori. Can you explain exactly what's going on

right now? Is there anything else you need to do besides show up?"

The brain of the operation, Inaba Himeko, had already moved on to the planning stage.

"Huh? Well, um... I kinda won't know until I get there..."

"Alright, well, you're absolutely not going by yourself. Should we split into two groups...? Nah, forget it. Let's move, everyone!"

"Yeah!" the others cheered in perfect unison.

And so the five of them ran down the road in the direction of Nagase's house.

In their condition, they couldn't take the train or even a taxi; after all, if they were to Regress in an enclosed space, they'd have no way to explain it. So they moved on foot, carefully choosing alleys and other unpopular streets.

There was no time to stop and plan things out beyond "if someone Regresses, we'll pause to reevaluate the situation."

They needed to run. A lot of time had passed since Nagase got the call from her stepfather. Run. No time for breaks. All they could do was simply pray the Regression wouldn't strike. Run. They needed to get to their destination and resolve the problem as quickly as possible—

"Nngh?!"

Just then, Inaba hunched over, clutching her chest.

"Inaba?!" Taichi shouted.

"Inaban, are you okay?!" Nagase asked.

"F-Fever... It's—"

A split-second later, she shrank.

"Oh, come on! You've gotta be kidding me!" Nagase hurried over to little Inaba and put her arms around her, shielding her from view. Thankfully the street was dark, and they didn't see anyone else around.

"How old are you, Ina—er, Himeko-chan?" Nagase asked as she rolled up the other girl's now-baggy sleeves and pant legs.

“...I’m twelve.”

Taichi stopped to catch his breath. “So that would put her in sixth grade... You think it’s a bad idea to take her with us?”

Inaba [age 12] was about two sizes smaller than her high school counterpart. Running around in an oversized coat would likely prove difficult. Plus, she likely had less stamina than—

“Aoki?!” Kiriyama shrieked.

Taichi whipped around to find... a pile of clothes on the ground.

“What the heck?!” Kiriyama dug through the pile and uncovered a baby who promptly began to cry.

“Aww! D-Don’t cry, sweetie! Now stay right there—it’s cold out here!” As she spoke, she wrapped his full-sized clothes around him in a makeshift bundle and lifted him up into her arms.

“Waaahhh...!”

“Umm... Can you tell me how old you are?”

“Dah buh!”

“Uh oh... Looks like he hasn’t even learned to talk yet...”

Which would put him right around [age 1].

“Oh god... This is all my fault... What do we do...?”

It was clear Nagase was starting to panic... and she wasn’t the only one.

“Two people Regressed... What if it strikes us, too...? No, even worse—what if they transform back in public?! Aagghhh...!” Kiriyama groaned.

Taichi’s heart began to thump uncomfortably in his chest. His mind was playing out every possible negative scenario at once, and he low-key wanted to puke.

Desperate to stay grounded, he pinched the back of his hand. *Stay calm*, he told himself.

As much as he wished he could run away and pretend this wasn’t happening, it was a problem they needed to confront head-on. Failure would result in dire consequences, and so

he needed to summon all his courage.

I've already screwed this up once. I can't make the same mistake again.

He needed to take charge and decide on the best course of action—like he should've done right from the very start.

And right now, to him, the best course of action was this:

"...Kiriyama, do you think you could take Inaba and Aoki back to the hideout?"

"What? By myself?"

"Yeah. And I'll go with Nagase back to her place."

"B-But... What if Yui Regresses, too? Or what if you and I Regress at the same time? Anything could happen," Nagase cut in.

She was right. It was a gamble, to be sure.

Taichi gazed at Kiriyama, and she looked back firmly... Then she glanced down at Aoki [age 1].

"Okay. Let's go with Taichi's plan."

"Y-Yui...?"

"No time to waste! Let's get moving!"

Without hesitation, Kiriyama walked over and took Inaba [age 12] by the hand. Meanwhile, Taichi crouched down to her eye level.

"In—er, Himeko-chan—if worse comes to worst, look after them for me, okay?"

One might argue that there was no sense in putting faith in a twelve-year-old girl who didn't have context for what was happening... but Taichi believed she would pull through, no matter what age she happened to be.

Inaba [age 12] nodded quietly.

"We're counting on you, Taichi! Hang in there, Iori!"

And so, with baby Aoki [age 1] and all his clothes in one hand and Inaba [age 12] in the other, Kiriyama dashed off back to the hideout.

"I'm so sorry... It's my fault we're all in this mess..."

Nagase whimpered in a tiny, trembling voice.

"Don't worry about it. Honestly, I would've done the same

thing in your shoes. Now let's hurry!"

"F-Finally... made it... We're here..." Nagase wheezed as they arrived at a weathered, old, two-story apartment complex.

Taichi gasped for breath. "So... this is... your place..."

"Our apartment's an end unit on the first floor."

"So... what's your game plan here? Should I come with you?"

"I don't think that'd be a good idea... You should probably wait ou—"

She was cut off by a loud *CRASH* as something shattered—a glass or perhaps a dinner plate—and a woman screamed.

It sounded like it was coming from inside Nagase's home.

"*Mom!*" Nagase took off running, and Taichi followed suit. Whatever was going on in there, it didn't sound safe.

Nagase rattled the doorknob, then pounded on the door with her fist. "Mom! Open the door! It's me, Lori!"

"Shut the fuck up! I'm coming, alright?!" a man answered from inside. The rasp in his voice suggested he'd been boozing pretty hard.

"Dad..." Nagase whispered.

Then the door opened.

And in that very instant, Nagase vanished into a pile of clothes on the ground.

Taichi's heart stopped.

Is this a dream?

Beneath the pile of clothes was a wriggling lump.

His brain had yet to process this, but his body moved on autopilot, scooping up the newly Regressed Nagase along with her clothes.

Then he took off like a bat out of hell.

Behind him he could hear angry shouting and thunderous footsteps. But he couldn't afford to look back and check. Did Nagase's stepfather witness her Regression? Did he

recognize her in child form? Taichi wasn't sure. All he knew was that he needed to get her out of there.

What if he were to Regress right this instant? What would happen to him? To them?

As he ran, this much younger Nagase peeked her head out of the jumbled pile of clothes, and the passersby shot him questioning looks as he dashed past. It must've been quite the baffling sight, a teen guy carrying a small girl bundled up in clothes clearly meant for someone two or three times her age.

At this point he'd run so long, his legs were starting to give out. No matter how hard he pushed himself, his speed was starting to peter out.

But he kept running nonetheless. He accidentally slammed into someone, but kept going. He hit a red light at the corner and turned right. Up ahead he could see a policeman heading his direction on a bicycle. His heart skipped a beat. Averting his gaze, he hoped the officer wouldn't notice—

"You there! Wh—"

Startled, Taichi broke into a run.

Then he rounded the next corner and ran some more.

What do I do? Is her dad still chasing me? What about the cop?

His lungs hurt. His legs were screaming at him to stop. He knew he couldn't keep going. He needed a plan. Go back to the hideout? But what about Nagase's mother? Now that it wasn't bound by a strict schedule, the Regression struck frequently. Was Kiriyama doing okay still? He didn't know where to run, so he headed for somewhere with less foot traffic. His brain needed more oxygen. He couldn't think.

Was this the end of the line?

Did he make the wrong choice?

Maybe so. But there was no going back.

He darted into a narrow alley... and came to a stop.

It was a dead end.

Behind him, he could hear footsteps approaching as a long shadow slowly stretched past him, cast by the nearby streetlamp.

Part of him was ready to throw in the towel, but another part of him was still convinced he could find a way out of it.

Slowly, Taichi turned.

And there stood [Gotou Ryuuzen], advisor to Yamaboshi High School Class 1-C and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club. Lifeless and lethargic with half-lidded eyes, «it» practically melted into the darkness of the alleyway.

This was «Heartseed», the original mastermind who had turned their lives upside down.

“Goodness me... You all seem to be having a fairly hard time...”

As usual, its speech was a slow drone. While at first glance there were similarities between it and «The Second», sure enough, «Heartseed» gave off a distinctly different vibe.

“Buh... wah...” Little Nagase seemed to sense the inherent danger and began to fuss.

“Oh, *now* you show up? Were you behind this the whole time?”

“No, no... I most certainly wasn’t... Wait, what? I thought you of all people knew the answer to that, Yaegashi-san...”

Could he trust it to tell the truth?

“Then why bother turning up? Where’s «The Second»?”

“Oh... Okay then... First, I guess let’s do what needs to be done... Ugh... I’m working too hard today...”

Suddenly the weight in his arms magnified, and he struggled to stay upright.

“Whoa!”

The next thing he knew, Nagase was back to normal.

With Taichi unable to support her weight, she fell to the alley floor.

“What the—Huh?! What is this, a straitjacket?! Oh, my arms aren’t in the sleeves for some reason...” Nagase

wriggled around for a moment, fixing her clothes, then got to her feet. "What's going on? Goss—" As the realization hit, she gasped and scrambled backwards, bumping into Taichi. "«Heartseed»..." she whispered, and he felt her start to shake.

"That should about do it..."

"*Should do it?* Meaning?"

As usual, it never offered much in the way of an explanation.

"Oh... Meaning I just ended the phenomenon... That's all..."

"You ended it?"

"Yes... Did you want to keep going...? I could start it up again... No, actually, I won't do that... Too much effort..."

"Wait... huh? The Age Regression is over now? What happened while I was Regressed, anyway? What's going on?" Nagase looked utterly baffled.

"I see... So that's what you've been calling it... Well... it wasn't meant to be part of my plan... which is why I've ended it..."

"Your plan...? Then what's the deal with «The Second»? Who are they in relation to you?"

"...It's a long story that would take too much effort to explain... Basically, we're not all one giant monolith... Each of us has our own definition of fascinating... Oh, but... I've seen to it there won't be any more disruptions like that in the future, so you'll never encounter—" There, «Heartseed» stopped mid-sentence. "Oh... Right... Just ignore that last part... I didn't mean to answer the question... Ugh, forget it... Let's call it quits here..."

As usual, it never fully answered their questions.

"The point is, it's over now... Say hi to the others for me..."

"Wait... What about my mom? What happened, Taichi? I remember we were at my house..."

"Yeah. Then you Regressed, and I had to get you out of there. We should probably hurry back."

“Got it.”

“Oh... That’s right... I almost forgot... Nagase-san?”

“Wh-What do you want? I don’t exactly have time to deal with you right now,” Nagase shot back, her voice thorny and laced with mistrust.

“Please, hear me out... I do think you’ll like what I have to say...” Despite the urgency they felt, «Heartseed» continued at its own aggravatingly slow pace.

“Spit it out already!”

“Oh... Losing your temper won’t help you here, Yaegashi-san... For that matter, this is not really any of your business... Could you kindly stay out of it?”

The unknown entity gazed at him with Gotou’s eyes, and goosebumps pricked up over his arms as though his body was repulsed on an instinctual level.

“Come now, Nagase-san... You know it’s too late to change anything, don’t you...?”

“Wh... What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about... the very thing you’re about to try to fix right now...”

How much did it know?

“You mean... m-my mom and dad?”

“Ah... So that’s what you call him...”

Are you suggesting she shouldn’t?

“It... It’s not too late...”

“Oh...? I thought *you* of all people already knew there would be no second chances...”

At this, the blood drained from her face. Taichi tensed, prepared to catch her if she collapsed.

“...Do you really want to try again?” Its voice was dry and monotone, and yet its words carried a hint of allure—dangerously appealing, like the sweet scent of a Venus flytrap. “My incompetence has put you all through quite an ordeal... So, to return the favor... No, that’s not right... Whatever... To make things right, I’m willing to give you a freebie... a gift... a little treat from me to you...”

If you want to do something nice for us, how about you never bother us again? Taichi thought.

“So, Nagase-san... would you like to start over? If so, I can make that happen for you.”

“...Start *what* over?”

“Everything... We’ll undo everything that’s happened thus far, and you can start again... from any point you desire.”

“What? Are you saying you can *reverse time*? That’s... That’s impossible...” Nagase scoffed, though she was a bit too stiff to be convincing. “You can’t do that... can you?”

«Heartseed»’s cheek twitched as it curled its lip a fraction of an inch. It was... smiling... if only from the nose down.

“I mean, sure, apparently you guys can transform us into our past selves, but... there’s no way you can go back and redo our lives,” she stammered.

If these beings could bring someone’s past to the present, could they take someone from the present and transport them back to the past?

If so... would that person have the chance to set right what once went wrong?

“Would you like to start over?” «Heartseed» repeated, a bit more firmly this time, and the magnetic pull intensified.

“I...”

At this, Taichi recalled a conversation they’d had in the past.

—Personally, I think I’d go for it, if I had the chance. Maybe everything would work out the second time around.

Thinking back, maybe that innocuous comment was actually a cry for help. Once again, she was drowning, and he couldn’t even toss her a lifesaver—but here came a giant cruise liner, far bigger than his measly rowboat, ready to haul her on board. All she had to do was ask... and then she’d be gone. Irrevocably gone.

“I... I’m tired of putting on an act... I want to be the *real* me. I want to be able to say ‘this is who I am’... and actually

mean it for once." Her words were a tiny ripple on the water's surface: quiet, yet strong enough to rock the boat. It was obvious this was what she truly wanted all along. "I won't try to claim I've had a hard life... but in my opinion, it hasn't been great... and deep down, I do wish things could've been different... so..."

If things had gone differently, maybe she never would've lost sight of her true self. Maybe she wouldn't have had to suffer that misery. Maybe, in a different life, this broken bird could have spread her wings and soared to new heights.

"So... I..."

He wanted to tell her not to go... but he couldn't. After all, he knew how much she'd suffered—and how powerless he was to help her.

"I..."

Thinking back, all three supernatural phenomena had affected Nagase drastically. And here at her breaking point, she was being offered a choice... almost like everything they went through was planned to lead up to this precise moment.

He couldn't stop it. All he could do was let the current take her—

At that moment, his left hand grew warm, and he could feel a steady pulse. Maybe he had latched onto her in the same way a drowning man would clutch at driftwood. Either way, the next thing he knew, he was holding Nagase's hand in his—and his mouth was moving of its own accord.

"I like you just the way you are."

"That's enough out of you, Yaegashi-san," «Heartseed» cut in, a rare occurrence for an entity that was ordinarily so sluggish.

But Taichi didn't mind. All that mattered was that she understood he accepted her for who she was.

Nagase trembled, rooted to the spot. Then, finally, she returned Taichi's grasp—tightly.

Just like that, he could scarcely feel the frosty winter air,

much less the chill of «Heartseed»'s presence.

“...I believe that my past experiences have made me into the person I am today. And if I let myself regret every single thing that happened, it'd be like saying I'm ashamed of who I am now... and I don't want that.” Her tone was firm, direct, unwavering. “I admit, I do sometimes wish I could get a second chance... but not because I want to erase my past failures. I just don't want to give up, that's all.”

As it turned out, there was a distinct difference between starting over from scratch versus trying again in spite of one's failure. While they might have seemed similar at first glance, in reality the two concepts were worlds apart.

“Back then... at the end of the day, I was just doing my best. I can't just erase all my hard work like that; it's not right. Now that I've seen what it means to live true to yourself... I could never do that.” Her grip on his hand tightened further, and he realized she must have been referring to Aoki and Kiriyma. “But more than that... I've found where I belong. I've found people I want to spend the rest of my life making new memories with.” Their fingers slowly laced together. “And everything that happened back then has led me to where I stand today. Without my past, I wouldn't be here in the present.” It was clear she truly cared for the club. “So if it means I have to wipe the slate clean... then I don't need a second chance that badly.”



A massive, destructive, otherworldly force had invited her to leave the ordinary behind—but Nagase had summoned all of her courage to flat-out decline.

It was pretty badass.

With its offer thrown back in its face, «Heartseed» stood there silently for what felt like an unusually long amount of time. Perhaps it hadn't anticipated that she would say no.

“Oh... I see...” Its curt response carried the faintest hint of either disappointment or relief; it was hard to tell which. “Well then... I guess that's that... In that case... we're done here...” It shook its head.

Nagase looked at Taichi, her eyes shimmering brighter than ever, and for a moment he was lost in the beauty of it.

“Let's go, Taichi.”

“Right.”

Their long battle with the supernatural was over at last.

Now they had a real-world problem to solve.

Their hands pulled away, and they took off running.

Past «Heartseed».

Leaving it in the dust.

When it came to real-world problems, there were no miracle cures. All they could do was play it by ear and try their best.

By the time they made it back to Nagase's apartment, they were both utterly out of breath. They rushed inside to find that her stepfather had left the house and thus far had yet to return. “He took our money with him before he left, so I assume he's gone off to buy booze,” Nagase's mother told them.

The living room was modestly furnished. Taichi and Nagase sat side-by-side on one end of the coffee table; a short while later, Nagase's mother returned carrying two steaming cups of tea, which she placed in front of them.

“Th-Thank you, ma'am,” Taichi stammered, then took a sip. Didn't want to be rude, after all. Meanwhile, he glanced

at her out of the corner of his eye.

His first impression: the woman was less like a normal human and more like a carefully crafted sculpture—her emotions muted, her features perfected with a thin layer of makeup. Her clothes were visibly cheap, and yet somehow they afforded her a regal air. All in all, Taichi found he couldn't really imagine what her day-to-day life was like or what she did for a living. In a way she seemed almost larger than life... although this was mitigated somewhat by the fat bruise on her cheek.

"Umm... Are you sure we should be hanging around here?" Nagase asked her mother.

"I doubt he'll come home for a while yet, so it's probably fine."

"*Probably* fine?" Taichi retorted before he could stop himself.

She looked at him, and he tensed up. Her natural charm felt... dangerous, somehow.

"So... what's going on?" she asked as she took a seat across from the two teens.

"Well... umm..." Nagase scratched her head as she searched for the words to explain it.

"It's okay. You can tell me," her mother replied, her voice as crisp as a mountain spring, almost as if she knew exactly what this was about. "If you're pregnant, then I'm excited for you."

Taichi promptly spat his tea across the room.

"A-Are you *crazy*?! Of! Course! I'm! Not! Pregnant!" Nagase pounded on the coffee table emphatically.

"You're not? I thought maybe you two were planning to elope and wanted to ask for my blessing."

"*No, no, no, no!*" she shouted, blushing.

"Well, okay then..."

First Kiriyama's sister, and now this? Why does everyone assume I knocked somebody up?!

Thankfully, this misunderstanding helped to lighten the

mood in the room considerably.

"Ahem! Anyway... Mom..." Nagase hesitated and looked away.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"Do you... love him? Does he make you happy?"

"Not at all," Nagase's mother answered without a moment's delay.

"Huh?" Nagase looked up. Apparently she hadn't anticipated that. "Wait... really?"

"Really. Obviously I did love him at one point in the past, but those feelings are long gone now."

Evidently Nagase had meant it when she said she didn't consult anyone about her problems, because Taichi got the sense that she and her mother had never really had this conversation before.

Then she asked the question he knew she'd been wanting to ask for a long, long time: "But... if you don't love him, then why are you letting him stay here?"

"Because I could tell that you cared a lot about trying to make things work," her mother answered easily. "I got the sense that you wanted to give him another chance."

"Huh...? Me?" Nagase stared blankly.

"Yes, you. Am I wrong about that?"

"Darn right, you're wrong! Well... okay, no, you were right. I was kinda hoping I could do things right this time."

"Thought so," her mother said with a sly grin.

"Okay, but—but I was only doing it for you!"

"You were?"

"I mean... okay, it was more so for me, but... but I never would've tried if I knew it wasn't what you wanted... Wait, what?" Nagase tilted her head in confusion. "Then... why did I bother...?"

Taichi had a feeling he knew where this was going.

"I know this is none of my business or anything, but... did you guys not talk to each other about your feelings toward this person? At any point before now?"

Mother and daughter shook their heads in unison. *Oh, for crying out loud! You two aren't mind readers!*

"But Mom... *you're* the one who invited him in, and you never tried to throw him out, so I figured you wanted us all to give it another shot!"

"I only chose to tolerate him because you seemed to care about him so much."

It was clear they had each tried to take the other's feelings into consideration... without actually making sure they had the right idea.

"Mom... why...? Why would you put yourself through that...?"

Once again, Nagase's mother didn't hesitate for a moment. "Iori... I only care about your well-being. As long as you're happy, nothing else matters."

Perhaps this was proof that she regretted putting herself first during Nagase's childhood and was now prepared to make any sacrifice to help her daughter follow her dreams.

Now it was Nagase's turn to speak her mind.

"Mom," she began, her voice soft and shaky with emotion, "I can't be happy unless you're happy, too."

The two of them had kept these feelings bottled up inside for far too long. Now, at long last, they were putting it all on the table.

For a moment, they gazed at each other silently. Now that they'd opened up to each other about how they really felt, their familial bond had grown even stronger... right before his very eyes.

As it turned out, relying on others wasn't always as easy as it sounded. Kiriyama was right; at the end of the day, they each needed to put in the effort to confront their problems. Sometimes they simply needed to summon the willpower to buckle down and get things done. But with strong willpower came the strong likelihood that this could backfire, leading to tunnel vision that would render someone deaf to their surroundings entirely, much less offers of help.

from friends.

So how do you know where to draw the line between things you ask for help with and things you do on your own? Frankly, there is no correct answer. You have to take it on a case-by-case basis. Yes, sometimes that means you screw up... but mistakes are how people learn, after all.

A long silence passed. Then Nagase's mother asked, "So... do you want him gone?"

"Well... if we're both happier without him, then yeah."

"Alright."

Finally, the two were on the same wavelength.

Just then—almost as if the universe had waited for that precise moment—someone began to pound on the front door.

"HEY! Who the fuck locked the door?! Open up, you dumb bitch!"

Judging from the rasp in his voice, it was Nagase's stepfather.

Nagase's mother jumped to her feet.

"He's home!" Nagase hissed under her breath.

"What do we do?!" Taichi whispered back as the two of them moved to stand up.

But Nagase's mother forced them back down into sitting positions. "I'm the grown-up here. This is my job."

"But Mom—!"

"I'll be fine."

There, for the first time, the woman smiled—soft, reassuring, and yet there was a strength to it. Instantly they knew she wouldn't take no for an answer.

She strode over to the door, unlocked it, and stepped outside.

"I'VE HAD IT UP TO HERE WITH YOU, YOU DEADBEAT DRUNK! THIS AIN'T YOUR HOUSE, AND WE DON'T OWE YOU SHIT! NOW GET LOST, SCUMBAG! AND STAY THE FUCK AWAY FROM US!"

As it turned out... Nagase's mom kicked ass.



And so Nagase's mother beat the crap out of her abusive ex-husband. (The course of events was unclear, but ultimately the incident ended with him prostrating himself at her feet and promising never to return.) Once he was gone, she went and apologized to the neighbors for the disturbance... and that was that.

Looking back, it was kind of anti-climactic, really. But as it turned out, most real-world problems didn't have dramatic conclusions; humans just often had trouble getting straight to the solution without a detour or two.

Taichi and Nagase walked side by side through the wintry city streets.

They were decidedly *not* holding hands.

"I wasn't much help this time around, was I?" Taichi sighed. Fortunately things had still worked out in their favor, despite the series of bad choices he'd made.

"I dunno about that. Personally, I'd say you helped a fair amount. After all, I couldn't have worked up the courage without you by my side. If you hadn't been there... Yikes. I don't even wanna think about it."

Had he really given her the strength she needed to find her happy ending? He just couldn't see it.

"But all I ever did was screw up and make the wrong judgment calls..."

"Oh, enough already! You know that's not true! I mean, okay, you did screw up some... but not where it mattered most. You probably just don't realize it since it came second-nature to you, but... it's the little things, y'know?" she grinned.

Man, I hope you're right. He felt his mood lift a bit.

It was one thing to regret his mistakes, but he couldn't afford to let himself get dragged down by it. He needed to move past it. So what if he screwed up? That was then. This is now.

Still, there was one last thing he wanted to discuss.
“Actually, I wanted to ask you about... the thing you said to him at the end.”

“Are you curious why I thanked him?”

There she was, bowing her head and yelling “Thank you for everything!” as he beat a hasty retreat down the street. It was quite a sight.

“Well...” Nagase jogged up ahead, then turned around, blocking his path. “I just thought, like... Despite everything that happened between us, I owe him a lot for making me into the person I am today, so I might as well say thank you! Y’know?”

If each person was a product of all of their lived experiences, both good and bad, then perhaps they ought to be grateful for those bad experiences all the same... To Taichi, this seemed like a hard sell.

“Now, if you ask me if I really meant it, that’s another story.” Evidently there were still some hard feelings. “But when you hold a grudge, it bogs you down... and forgiving someone sets you free.” From the way she smiled, he could tell that she’d finally come to terms with everything. “I owe you all so much. Thank you, Taichi... I wouldn’t be here without you. And I’ll be sure to thank the others, too.”

With that, Nagase turned back around and walked forward once more.

In that moment, she shone brighter than all the lights of the city. Brighter than the moon.

She had thrown off the shackles of her past, and now she was free.

Epilogue: All It Takes

After spending winter break visiting her dad and his family, Mihashi Chinatsu will be taking the bullet train back home to her mom. At least, that's what her dad told me. (Come to think of it, now that her parents are divorced, she's not really "Mihashi" anymore, is she? Oh well.)

If I hurry, I can still make it. I can still fix it.

So here I am, running like my life depends on it.

I know, I know. Took me long enough, right? Well, like, I *don't* care. I can't afford to get hung up on it anymore. No matter what happens, I need to stand on my own two feet, confront my problems, and move forward.

Will I make it?

I have to. Yeah, I'll see to it that I do. "No" is not an option. I'll do whatever it takes to make it happen.

Run. Keep running. Don't stop!

Then, finally—I catch sight of her as she's about to leave.

"Mihashi-san!"

She flinches and turns to look, ponytail swaying.

"Kiri...yama...?" Her angular face normally gives her this totally unapproachable vibe—but right now she's just a normal girl who looks a little confused.

"I made it... Thank God...!"

Honestly, I maybe wasn't super confident I'd actually make it...

"Wh-What do you want? You... you quit karate, and you're not going to tell me why, so... I thought you wanted me to leave you alone..."

If I sincerely regret my actions, then I need to apologize. That way I can move on.

"I'm sorry for being such a bitch! And for breaking our

promise! I'm just... I'm sorry for everything!"

"Uh... Look... You don't have to apologize," she mumbles as she glances around anxiously, looking conflicted. "I wasn't exactly being considerate myself. See, uh... After my parents got divorced, I had to leave a lot behind... It's hard to explain, but... that promise I made with you was sort of symbolic of that, in a way."

Now that I was honest with her for once, she was willing to open up to me.

"Anyway, enough about that. What do you want?"

"Oh, um... There's something I wanted to say to you."

"Okay? What is it?"

"Well, you see..."

Mihashi looks annoyed... but on closer inspection, deep down, I can tell she's interested.

"I'm... thinking about getting back into karate."

"What?! Wh... Why?"

Aha! She smiled!

Then she turns away to hide it, but it's too late! I saw that!

Well, well... She seems all scary on the outside, but she's really just like any other girl, huh?

Turns out, when you take someone seriously and pay attention to their signals, it's actually not that hard to figure out what they're trying to tell you.

So, I guess I'd better signal back... Then maybe she'll understand where I'm coming from.

And then maybe things can be different for us.

"Because I knew I was just being a coward... and I realized there's something I can do about it."

"So... you're gonna quit your weird club and join a dojo or something?"

"I'm not going to quit the CRC."

At this, Mihashi scowls slightly. "Why not? It's so pointless!"

"Yeah, I know," I reply with a self-deprecating smile. "But

at the same time, it's not."

"...What's that supposed to mean?"

"Um, well... It's hard to explain, but like... To me, it's worthwhile *because* it doesn't have a point to it."

Seriously, I don't know how to describe the way the CRC makes me feel. I think it's just one of those things where you'll never understand unless you experience it for yourself.

Still, I gotta try to put it into words.

"When we're hanging out in the clubroom, or when we accomplish something together... Everything just feels so *right*. And when I'm with them... I feel like I can really shine."

There's a warmth in the clubroom that I can't explain. It's just so... *perfect*. And maybe there's no inherent value in that, but to me, it's everything.

"So I'm going to stay in the club *and* do karate."

"Just because you're naturally gifted, you think you can catch up to the rest of us without even putting your full effort in?"

"I don't know... but this is what I want, so I'll just have to try." I pause for a moment. "And just so you know, you aren't going to beat me."

I'll make it happen—no ifs, ands, or buts.

"While we're on the subject, um... About that sparring match we got into the other day..."

"L-Look, I'm sorry about that! I shouldn't have challenged you on the street without even letting you warm up—"

"I know, right? That was totally unfair! S-So it doesn't count, right?!"

"Huh?"

"That match was invalid, got it?! So it didn't break my winning streak against you!" I declare, pointing at her firmly.

I can hear my competitive side shouting "Don't let her have this! Don't back down!"

She laughs. "Okay, fine."

In all the time we've known each other, Mihashi's never so

much as smiled at me—and now here she is, grinning from ear to ear. But why? Is it because I've changed?

...No, wait. I do remember one time me and Mihashi smiled at each other...

—If I win, Kiriyama, I want you to start calling me by my first name.

—Sure. If you win, that is.

I forget when we had that conversation, but it definitely happened at some point. And I remember we were smiling for some reason...

Now I finally remember how I felt back then. I always wanted to—

...God, we're such a couple of literal babies. Both of us.

We're both stubborn mules who hate to lose, and our weird karate rivalry got in the way of what really matters. We were both dying to say it—but as much as our similarities drew us to each other, those same traits kept us apart.

Maybe it's too late... No.

As long as we... care about each other... there's still time.

You can't get what you want if you just twiddle your thumbs. You have to really *want* it.

It doesn't matter how much time has passed. I mean, obviously time does change things, but I'm sure you'll still get the opportunity to try again.

And if all else fails, you can create that opportunity yourself. You can create anything if you try!

If you want someone to be your friend, then say so! If you want someone to do something for you, then ask! If you want permission to do something, then keep persisting until they let you!

The world we live in isn't actually all that complex. It's not hard to obtain the things that really matter. No need to rationalize it out—it's all pretty straightforward.

Or maybe it's just that the easiest things to obtain happen to be the things that really matter. If you look for them, you can find them. If you work for them, you can get

your hands on them.

All it takes is a little courage.

Now it's time for me to take the first step.

This is where I'll start over... this time, as her friend.

"...G-Give me your email address, Chinatsu!"

"...G-Gimme your email address, Yui!"

Wait, what? Did Mi—I mean, Chinatsu—just say the same exact thing?

+ + +

Once again, the five of us put our heads together to escape a dire crisis. Pretty impressive, honestly. The CRC kicks a lot of ass these days. And I get the sense the others feel that way about me, too.

I'm not just being conceited. I sincerely think we all see each other as badass. It's a pretty ideal friendship, I gotta say!

But... can I keep this up? And if so—

Nah, forget it.

They're all a bunch of good eggs, and they've helped me a ton. Especially Taichi. I can't help but feel both grateful and a little guilty.

Taichi's a good guy. A really good guy.

But... lately I keep asking myself...

Do I, Nagase Iori, truly have feelings for him?

The End

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume 3 of the *Kokoro Connect* series!

If you have yet to read the first two volumes (Volume 1: *Hito Random* and Volume 2: *Kizu Random*), I encourage you to do so. I mean, I'm sure you'd still be able to enjoy this book regardless, but still.

Anyway, hello again, everyone! Anda Sadanatsu here.

Thank you so much for all of your support. Without it, *Kokoro Connect* never would have made it this far, and I hope you'll continue to support the series going forward!

...I guess it's kinda weird to flat-out ask you to keep reading, huh? As long as the books are good, I'm sure you'll all read them regardless. And if they suck, well, no amount of begging is going to get people to continue. So yeah, I'll just have to keep giving it my absolute best! And if by chance you think to yourself, "Wow, an attempt was made"—er, I mean, "Wow, what a good book," then by all means please continue to enjoy the rest of the series!

Anyway, moving on! This time around, my editor has asked me to choose an abbreviation for Kokoro Connect and announce it here in my afterword, so here goes!

Of all the many candidates I came up with, the official abbreviation is:

KokoroCo! KokoroCo! KokoroCo! KokoroCo! KokoroCo!
KokoroCo! KokoroCo!

What do you think? I figured it wouldn't click unless I said it about seven times or so. But now it totally clicks, right?

What? It doesn't? Okay then, I want you to say it out loud seven times! Go!

See? Now it totally clicks... Just forget about all those other, way better abbreviations... There! Perfect! (Let's not point out the fact that I basically had to brainwash you in order to make this abbreviation seem appealing!)

Now then, on to the acknowledgments!

First, as I mentioned at the beginning of this afterword, I'd like to thank everyone who has been supporting the series from the first volume. My work couldn't have been published without you. Thank you so much!

Second, I'd like to thank everyone who worked hard to help me get this book published, particularly my editor. Thank you for bearing with me!

Third, a HUGE thank you to Shiromizakana-sama for all of these high-quality illustrations! It really wouldn't be *Kokoro Connect* without you. I look forward to where we go from here!

Lastly, an announcement!

A manga adaptation of *Kokoro Connect* is set to begin serialization in Famitsu Comic Clear! (This may be old news by the time you read this.) Be sure to check out CUTEG-sensei's adorable depictions of all your favorite characters!

Before I go, I'd like to extend my full gratitude to all of my readers once again. Thank you!

—Anda Sadanatsu
August 2x1x

Translator's Column

Hello, everyone! My name is Molly Lee, and I was the translator for Kokoro Connect: Kako Random. This volume had a heavy focus on Yui and her shortcomings, and I enjoyed watching her slowly dismantle her own complacency. (Full disclosure: The hug scene totally made me tear up.)

So, let's talk about the title.

As a refresher (or for those of you who might have missed my J-Novel Club exclusive Translator's Column in the previous volumes), "kokoro" means heart, but it can also mean mind or soul. Paired with "connect," it suggests a linking of hearts. This is the overarching theme for the entire series.

Then there's the subtitle for volume 3: Kako Random. "Kako" means past or history, followed by the English word "random." Together, they hint at the small glimpses the author gives us into the backstories of each (well, most) of the characters. If I were to set an official English subtitle, I would have liked to go with "Swapping Scars," maintaining the "shuffle" imagery implied by "random" while also hinting at old wounds the characters carry with them from, you guessed it, the past.

That said, a title like that wouldn't quite capture the underlying theme of this volume: time. Going back in time. Running out of time. Timeframe. One minute the gang is racing to arrive in time, and the next they're just sitting around, waiting for time to run out. As a narrative device, it works well to illustrate just how little control any of the characters have at any given moment. With the Age Regression, they're basically forced to play it by ear all day,

every day—easily making Kako Random far more tense than either of the previous volumes.

Kako Random also marks the first volume in the series where Japanese culture becomes a plot point. Early in the story, Gotou warns the students not to go to any “love hotels”—hotels that exist expressly for the purpose of having sex—on Christmas in particular. This might strike Western readers as a bit strange, because our culture predominantly associates Christmas with family; if anything, New Year’s Eve is the more romantic winter holiday. In Japan, however, this is entirely reversed; Christmas Eve is popularly known as a holiday for couples, whereas Japanese New Year’s tradition often involves a lot of time spent with relatives, particularly grandparents.

But those aren’t the only two winter holidays to feature in Kako Random. This volume sees the gang visiting a Shinto shrine to celebrate hatsumoude (lit. “first visit”), a tradition upheld at the start of January in order to pray for good fortune for the rest of the upcoming year. Rather than struggle to depict this uniquely Japanese holiday in localized English, I chose to leave the name intact so that curious readers might Google it and learn something new. Same thing with takoyaki, which I felt wouldn’t sound quite as tasty rendered as “octopus fritters” or something like that. Just Google it! (And then go get some takoyaki, because it’s delicious.)

At one point during the climax of Yui’s emotional arc, she likens herself to a famous quote attributed to Buddha: *tenjou tenge yuiga dokuson* (天皇天帝ゆがどくそん), popularly translated to “I am my own lord throughout heaven and earth.” In the original Japanese, Yui points out that this phrase contains the kanji for her name (由). All the more reason for it to resonate with her, right? So, to keep this detail intact, I had the idea to instead take the English phrase and turn it into some sort of anagram using her name... That didn’t end up working out too well, so we

ultimately decided against it. But for those of you who might be curious, please enjoy(?) this shortlist of horrible half-finished anagram attempts:

- Mom, Dad, hear that? Yui won't run or leave
- Heal and never harm tough woman Yui
- Hear that, male goon? Move! Yui won't run
- AAH! Yui! Run, male dong-haver who doth torment her!

Ah, what could have been...

Before I go, I'd like to thank everyone at J-Novel Club, particularly my editor, Adam Fogle. (And to the author, Anda Sadanatsu—my headcanon for the shortened title is still #KoCo. You do you, though.)

See you in volume 4: Michi Random!

Editor's Row

This is Adam Fogle, editor of Kokoro Connect: Kako Random, back for another round. And man, what a rollercoaster it was. If I were a betting man, I'd put good money on this not being the last time we see The Second.

Now, I'd like to start by briefly talking about something near and dear to my heart: the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive has a couple different forms. The present subjunctive is when you use the bare infinitive form of a verb to express desires or requirements, usually after the word "that". For example, "I require that you listen to my instructions" or "God save the Queen." Not exactly common, but something that every native speaker understands, even if you can't explain it.

The past subjunctive is a different story. It's a lot more common, and yet people get it wrong all the time. This is (usually) when you use "were" or "had been" instead of "was" to talk about something that isn't the case, that is not currently true, like what I wrote in the first paragraph. You often see it in "if" sentences, but not all of them. On the flip side, even when it is appropriate to use, strictly speaking you never have to use it at all. It's just an added nuance. That's why you may have noticed kid Aoki failing to use the subjunctive when he had the chance to. ...No? Nobody noticed? Well, maybe you picked up on the simplified speech subconsciously.

These are the kinds of fiddly rules an editor should know. Not that I learned them in school or anything. I picked up this and lots of other linguistic details from the internet.

I may have become a tedious pedant in my old age. But speaking of Aoki, that brings me to the main

challenge this volume presented: Finding the right level of consistency in the voices of the characters, when the characters themselves were not fully consistent with themselves due to the changes in age. Nagase was the easy one, taking on varying personae at different points in her life, so each stage could be its own thing, but with the same underlying current of knowingness and manipulation underneath. Aoki simply became more basic in speech and manner the further back he went. Inaba went through phases that were more distinct than Nagase's and told a more linear story. At first she was precocious and observant, then there was a long stretch in the middle of her current life when she barely spoke at all, and just in the last couple years she became outspoken and increasingly rude, at an exponential rate. And then there's Kiriyama, who lacked her teenageocity, but in its place had more enthusiasm and even hyper-activity at times. Her character was divided into two acts, separated sharply by the moment her trauma was inflicted on her.

How fascinating, to have all that contrast paraded around. When it comes down to it, we really are different people now than when we were truly young. Yet who we become is built upon that old foundation. Some things don't change. The trick in this volume was to find those common threads that remained the same throughout, and make sure they came through clearly enough that the person was still somewhat recognizable. Simplicity and intelligence. Savvy. Vivaciousness. Finding the opportunities to have them say the words that are their own, even if only in a small way.

Of course, some characters need very little help being distinctive. Like Heartseed. It's not just the ellipses... Its speech is filled with vagueness and waffling. Although, that seems to be at least somewhat an affectation - an act that it puts on. After all, it presents itself almost like a natural disaster, bound by the behaviors it lays out for its games, but otherwise striking at random, unfeeling and

unstoppable. (That's also why we chose to use the pronoun it for Heartseed and its ilk, to make it more impersonal.) When it gets really serious, though, it drops the habit, as it did in its brief appearance in this volume. When it's only semi-serious, it dials up its apparent level of not-caring, as it did towards the end of volume 1. It's a rather dishonest entity, its actions more pointed than it would have its victims believe.

On the other hand, now we have The Second added to the mix as well. Though it is similarly lifeless, it contrasts with Heartseed in a number of ways. Most importantly, compared to Heartseed's hemming and hawing, it speaks in a very definite way, precise and certain, except when it is deliberately withholding information. It's fitting, when one considers that unlike Heartseed's random phenomena, The Second does things on an exact and regular schedule. It is also much more concise, so even though it doesn't spend all its time moaning about how everything is too much effort, it still goes about things in a more efficient way. Overall, it seems to lack personality and existence compared to the original.

Well, to wrap things up, thanks again to the wonderful translator, Molly Lee. I couldn't ask for anyone better. Also, to everyone at J-Novel Club and all the readers for your continued support. And of course, to author Sadanatsu Anda. Keep escalating, you shining devil. I'll hope to see everyone back in volume 4.



Thank You
for reading! ♪

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Kokoro Connect Volume 03: Kako Random
by Sadanatsu Anda

Translated by Molly Lee
Edited by Adam Fogle

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